

6th ANNUAL CANQATE CONFERENCE

THEME:

“BALANCING QUALITY AND QUANTITY: THE GLOBAL CHALLENGE FOR TERTIARY EDUCATION”

SUB-THEME:

“QUALITY ASSURANCE TRENDS FOR THE FUTURE”

TITLE OF PAPER:

AN EMERGING MODEL FOR EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN SMALL STATES: INCREASING ACCESS AND IMPROVING QUALITY IN THE CARIBBEAN COMMUNITY (CARICOM)

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ABSTRACT:

Distinct social, cultural, economic and political differences among geographical regions and countries account for wide diversity in the nature of their higher education systems. The increasing internationalisation of higher education over the past two decades has brought pressure to bear on many countries in terms of the need to develop and maintain effective quality assurance systems.

This paper presents a comparative analysis of emerging frameworks for external quality assurance in member states of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM). It examines key characteristics of their higher education systems and the role and functions of regional and national bodies. The unique circumstances surrounding the development of these systems have given rise to external quality assurance agencies (EQAAs) that have a multiplicity of functions and complex structures.

The authors explore this complexity and the implications for resource requirements, efficiency and sustainability. The paper puts forward a model for external quality assurance in small states.

I. INTRODUCTION

While formal systems for external quality assurance of higher education date back over one hundred years in some nations, countries in other parts of the world, such as the Caribbean, have relied on extra-regional arrangements for the evaluation of quality in the absence of a structured approach at the national and regional levels. The rapid expansion of higher education provision to meet increasing demand by out-of-school youth as well as adult learners seeking to advance their careers or engage in lifelong learning, has presented several challenges. In spite of the continued expansion of the regional university, the University of the West Indies (UWI), with three physical campuses and an Open Campus (offering distance education), student demand continues to exceed the available opportunities and this has precipitated an increase in the number of public and private non-degree and degree-granting institutions. These include off-shore universities from the United States of America, the United Kingdom and other countries, small specialised colleges offering primarily business or information technology programmes, and a variety of collaborative partnerships between local and foreign institutions. Quality assurance therefore focuses not only on the accreditation of local institutions offering indigenous qualifications but on a number of cross-border arrangements.

The Caribbean Community (CARICOM) which was established in 1973 consists of fifteen countries committed to regional integration which facilitates improved standards of living, sustained economic, social and cultural development and enhanced international competitiveness. By declaration in 1989, the region embarked on the establishment of the CARICOM Single Market and Economy (CSME) and priority has been placed on increasing access to quality higher education and removing all obstacles to intra-regional movement of skilled persons. National and regional economic growth and development potentials are also being increasingly linked with the efficiency and effectiveness of the education sectors of countries in the region.

Governments of the region are concerned about the nature and performance of their higher education systems as they seek to establish measures to ensure greater accountability for the use of scarce resources, not only by the public institutions but private ones as well. A decision was taken at the regional level in 2002 to give priority to the establishment of autonomous national accreditation bodies by 2003 in furtherance of the objectives of the CSME. Draft legislation was proposed by the CARICOM Secretariat. The legislative frameworks from a policy perspective allowed governments of the region to set broad expectations for external quality assurance agencies (EQAAs) while giving them the autonomy to define details for standard setting, evaluation and monitoring institutional quality. These expectations are that efficient and effective national quality assurance systems would:

1. Establish standards of excellence in quality tertiary education.
2. Evaluate and monitor performance of institutions against the standards.
3. Enforce and encourage compliance with national standards that are regionally accepted and internationally comparable.
4. Stimulate and support the development of a quality culture based on transparency, self-evaluation and commitment to continuous improvement

In this context, there are new EQAAs emerging in the Caribbean with a mandate to develop common standards and measures for accreditation and also for assessing the equivalence of

qualifications across the region. Given the small population size of the countries, and the unique characteristics of the higher education systems, the EQAAs have been given multiple functions which in other countries would be carried out by different agencies, both public and private. This has given rise to a level of complexity in the role and expectations of the EQAAs at the national level and has implications for resource requirements as well as the efficiency and sustainability of the effective operations of the agencies.

This paper explores the emerging quality assurance systems for higher education in CARICOM. The authors briefly define social, political, economic and cultural characteristics of the fifteen territories comprising the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and identify key characteristics of higher education systems in CARICOM. The paper presents a comparative analysis of national frameworks for external quality assurance in CARICOM explaining the commonality and divergence in quality assurance frameworks and the role and functions of the national bodies. The analysis focuses on: the purpose of QA; the legislative framework; the nature of the national EQQA, its structure for governance; role and functions & scope of authority; higher education sector characteristics; and quality assurance evaluation methodologies. The authors discuss the multiple functions of the national bodies and the implications for resource requirements (human and financial); evaluation and assessment methodologies; and impact on the higher education sectors and review available data on the performance of the existing quality assurance systems in CARICOM. Finally, the paper proposes a model for external quality assurance agencies (EQAAs) and a regional framework for quality assurance that seeks to address the needs of small states.

II. THE CARIBBEAN COMMUNITY (CARICOM)

Twelve of the fifteen (15) CARICOM member states are classified as ‘small states’ within the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth defines ‘small states’ as those with a population of 1.5 million or fewer, however, Jamaica, Lesotho and Papua New Guinea are included as a consequence of the fact that they share physical and economic characteristics of small states in their regions. States with populations of less than 200,000 are classified as ‘mini states’ and, within CARICOM, these include Antigua & Barbuda (100,000); Dominica (80,000); Grenada (100,000); St Kitts and Nevis (50,000); and St Vincent and the Grenadines (115,000). Other small states are the Bahamas (307,000); Barbados (300,000); Belize (300,000); Guyana (860,000); Jamaica (2,600,000); St Lucia (200,000); and Trinidad and Tobago (1,300,000)¹. English is the official language of all states with the exception of French-speaking Haiti with a population of 8,222,000 and Dutch-speaking Suriname with a population of 420,000. These countries are members of CARICOM but not of the Commonwealth. The total population of the CARICOM countries is approximately 15,000,000. There are also five (5) countries that are associate members of CARICOM: Anguilla, Bermuda, British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands and Turks and Caicos islands.

¹ Figures provided by <http://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/america.htm> as at October 2008

The three pillars of CARICOM (also referred to as ‘the Community’) from its inception have been economic integration; co-ordination of foreign policy and functional co-operation in areas such as health, education and culture, and other areas related to human and social development. In 2007, a fourth pillar – security, was added in recognition of the heightened challenge to security in the region. The objectives of the Community as identified in Article 6 of the *Revised Treaty of Chaguaramas Establishing the Caribbean Community*² are: to improve standards of living and work; the full employment of labour and other factors of production; accelerated, co-ordinated and sustained economic development and convergence; expansion of trade and economic relations with third States; enhanced levels of international competitiveness; organisation for increased production and productivity; achievement of a greater measure of economic leverage and effectiveness of Member States in dealing with third States, groups of States and entities of any description and the enhanced co-ordination of member States’ foreign and [foreign] economic policies and enhanced functional co-operation.

In deepening the regional integration movement which has its genesis in the establishment of the West Indies Federation in 1958, and strengthening areas of co-operation, several regional institutions have been established through the years, for example the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC) and the Caribbean Court of Justice (CCJ); with the Caribbean Development Bank (CDB); Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) and The University of the West Indies (UWI) as associate institutions.

CARICOM countries with the exception of Haiti, Guyana and Belize are geographically small, ranging from 40 square miles (103 km²) in the case of Montserrat, to 83,000 mi² (214,970 km²) in Guyana. Eight (8) of the fifteen (15) CARICOM countries have a land area of under 300 mi². Land usage is therefore an area of concern as the region addresses the challenge of economic competitiveness, sustainable development and wealth creation in an increasingly globalised economy (Bourne, 2008). With the exception of Trinidad and Tobago which has petroleum and natural gas, Jamaica which has bauxite and Guyana which has bauxite, gold, diamond and other unexploited minerals, the other countries’ natural resources are primarily agricultural land and coastal resources such as fisheries and beaches. The major industry for most of the islands is tourism making them very vulnerable to the effects of the current economic downturn in the United States of America (USA), United Kingdom (UK), Europe and other markets, as well as to natural disasters such as hurricanes, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions.

III. THE REGIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION ENVIRONMENT

European colonisation of islands of the Caribbean began in the fifteenth century and the first nation to proclaim its independence was Haiti in 1804. With the exception of Montserrat, which is still a British dependency, the CARICOM member states are independent nations. The education system in the majority of the countries was largely influenced by the British and consists of primary education from age five (5) to twelve (12); secondary education from eleven (11) to sixteen (16) and two years of advanced secondary education (16 – 18). Graduates of

² The Treaty of Chaguaramas established the Caribbean Community on July 4th 1973. The Revised Treaty was signed in 2001.

advanced secondary education typically enter into higher education (also referred to as post-secondary or tertiary education) offered by universities and colleges. Over the past two decades however a growing number of school leavers who have completed basic secondary education, mainly leading to the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC) examinations, have opted to enter colleges that offer associate degree programmes.

The popularity of the associate degree in the region is believed by some to have been influenced by the migration patterns in the 1980s which saw a large number of skilled and unskilled persons migrating to the USA (legally and illegally). Children of emigrants often attended US colleges that offered easier access to the associate degree than was possible in a region with a limited number of higher education institutions and in which only a relatively small number of high achievers, who had successfully completed advanced secondary education, were accepted into three-year bachelor degree programmes. As citizens began returning home with the associate degree and employers accepted the value of the qualification, student demand for it within the region grew. In many CARICOM countries therefore traditional universities offering bachelor's and post-graduate degrees exist alongside post-secondary colleges, technical institutes and community colleges that offer associate degrees, certificates and diplomas. Some transfer arrangements allow students credit for the two-year associate degree towards a four-year bachelor's degree.

Six major national/regional universities in the Community are – The University of the West Indies (UWI) with campuses in Barbados, Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago and an Open (Distance Education) Campus serving other territories; University of Guyana; University of Technology, Jamaica; Anton von Kom University, Suriname; University of Belize and the University of Trinidad and Tobago (UTT). There are also a growing number of community colleges, teacher training colleges, private universities and off-shore colleges and universities, many offering transnational qualifications.

Over the past decade governments of the CARICOM countries have sought to increase the investment in human development, and in particular to commit more resources to the expansion of higher education. This is being done to meet growing demands for tertiary education from out-of-school youth and adult learners seeking opportunities for career advancement and/or engaging in life-long learning. The value of higher education to the development of the region is underscored in policy documents in every country as it is recognised that education, as an investment, has high potential rates of individual and social return. It is universally accepted that the majority of jobs in the new knowledge-driven economy will require post-secondary/higher education. Additionally, human development is so central to economic growth; national security and social cohesiveness that the peace, prosperity and security of individual nations are inextricably linked to the efficiency and effectiveness of their higher education systems. The key policy issues for CARICOM countries have been identified by some researchers as access, equity, relevance and quality (Poon-Kwong, 2006).

There are several regional initiatives which address these issues. The Association of Caribbean Tertiary Institutions (ACTI) was established in 1990 with the primary aim to facilitate more effective utilisation of scarce resources to enhance access, mobility and quality in tertiary education. ACTI has approximately 96 members in seventeen (17) Caribbean countries. In 2002, CARICOM through the Council on Human and Social Development (COHSOD) took a decision to give priority to the establishment of autonomous national accreditation bodies in member

states. Such bodies would serve to provide the basis for the recognition of qualifications across the region and so facilitate the free movement of skills within the Caribbean Single Market and Economy (CSME). So far national bodies have been established in seven CARICOM countries – Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Guyana, Jamaica, St Kitts and Nevis, St Vincent and the Grenadines and Trinidad and Tobago (Suriname is currently in the initial stages of establishing a national agency).

Also at the regional level, a specialised accrediting body for medicine - the Caribbean Accreditation Authority for Medicine and other Health Professions (CAAM-HP) was established in 2003 to conduct evaluations of the compliance of medical education programmes with nationally and internationally accepted standards of educational quality. The Caribbean Area Network for Quality Assurance in Tertiary Education (CANQATE) was formed in 2004 as the sub-regional network of the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) for the Caribbean region. Its primary function is to promote the importance of accreditation and to assist accrediting bodies and educational institutions in the implementation of best practices in quality assurance in tertiary education. More recently, in 2008, a Steering Committee was set up to establish the Caribbean Accreditation Council for Engineering and Technology (CACET) and a proposal has already been made to CARICOM for the development of regional standards for teacher education. Finally, there exists an Inter-governmental Agreement to establish the Caribbean Community Accreditation Agency for Education and Training. The main functions of the regional body will be to:

- Develop guidelines for good practice in tertiary education to assist national accreditation bodies in discharging their responsibilities;
- Develop core criteria, standards and procedures for facilitating the further development of a tertiary education quality assurance system in the Community;
- Collaborate with national accreditation bodies, professional bodies and other relevant bodies to develop training programmes designed to create a regional cadre of trained assessors;
- Co-ordinate tertiary education accreditation initiatives in the region, including establishing a code of good practice for specialised agencies and professional bodies to maintain the integrity of the quality assurance system in the Community; and
- Provide guidance or guidelines for the evaluation of foreign qualifications

The Agreement is currently being signed by the respective governments.

IV.A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF NATIONAL EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES (EQAAs) IN CARICOM

Research by the authors suggests that at least seven (7) CARICOM states have established national bodies with specific responsibility for the external quality assurance of their post secondary and tertiary education sectors. Table 1 (pp. 9 - 11) presents a comparative analysis that seeks to highlight similarities and differences among the emerging external quality assurance systems in Antigua and Barbuda; Barbados; Guyana; Jamaica; St Kitts and Nevis; St. Vincent and the Grenadines and Trinidad and Tobago. The comparison was based on a review of legislation and a survey administered to the tertiary education ministries and quality assurance agencies in the respective CARICOM states.

The comparison focuses on key characteristics of the respective higher education sectors including the number and type of institutions and the student population they serve. It also addresses the rationale at the national level for seeking to establish these bodies and the legislative frameworks which govern their operations. Of particular importance to the comparison is the governance model of the external quality assurance bodies, their functions and service offerings, and their human resource capacity. Although most of these bodies, with the exception of the University Council of Jamaica, are in the early stages of development, the table also identifies some key achievements of the respective bodies thus far. The authors view this comparative analysis as a pivotal point in the establishment of a sustainable model for external quality assurance of higher education in small states.

COUNTRY	HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR	PURPOSE FOR EXTERNAL QA SYSTEM	EQAA LEGISLATION	EQAA GOVERNANCE	FUNCTIONS OF EQAA	EQAA RESOURCES	EQAA SERVICES	EQAA PERFORMANCE
ANTIGUA AND BARBUDA	In Antigua there are approximately 15 tertiary and post secondary institutions - two foreign offshore universities, one University of the West Indies Open Campus site, two public tertiary educational institutions (the Antigua State College and the Antigua and Barbuda Institute of Information Technology) and a few private post secondary institutions. The Antigua State College has the largest higher education student enrolment on the island with approximately 1,000 students. There are less than 2,000 students currently enrolled in higher education in Antigua and Barbuda.	The establishment of the external QA system in Antigua and Barbuda as outlined in the national legislation is intended to make higher education more accountable to stakeholders; regulate the higher education sector; facilitate international mobility of national graduates; improve the quality of local higher education; and facilitate the establishment of the CSME.	The Accreditation Act, 2006 established the National Accreditation Board of Antigua and Barbuda as a corporate body for higher education quality assurance and accreditation.	There are 10 Board members appointed by the Minister. These include the Chief Education Officer; 1 representative of the organisation of labour unions; 1 representative from each established professional body, the Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Health; 1 Chamber of Commerce representative; 1 representative of the Attorney General's office; 1 representative of Antigua State College; 1 representative of the Department of Planning; the Director of Culture; and the Executive Director as an ex officio member.	The EQAA's functions in the Act are to register institutions; accredit institutions and programmes; recognise and determine equivalence of foreign awards and programmes; advise the Minister on the award of degree-granting powers to institutions; advise the Minister on issues of quality in higher education; facilitate free movement of skilled nationals in CSME; develop a unified credit-based system for higher education programmes; and discharge functions assigned by Minister.	The EQAA is headed by an Executive Director appointed by the Board.	The National Accreditation Board of Antigua and Barbuda has not yet begun to offer services to the higher education sector in that country.	
				This Board needs the Minister's approval before decisions with respect to QA evaluations can be made.		Staff arrangements for the EQAA have not yet been finalised. Administrative duties are performed by the staff of the Ministry of Education.		
						The Ministry of Education cover all costs related to the initial operations of the body.		
BARBADOS	Approximately 50 tertiary and post secondary institutions operate in Barbados. The University of the West Indies Cave Hill Campus and another private university are the only universities in Barbados. Additionally, there are two major public non-university level institutions which offer post-secondary and tertiary programmes and over 30 small private tertiary and post-secondary institutions. Approximately 11,500 students are currently enrolled in higher education in Barbados.	The establishment of the external QA system in Barbados as outlined in national legislation is intended to make higher education more accountable to stakeholders; regulate the higher education sector; facilitate international mobility of national graduates; improve the quality of local higher education; and facilitate the establishment of the CSME.	The Barbados Accreditation Council Act (Act# 11 of 2004) of June 2004 established the Barbados Accreditation Council as a corporate body for the purpose of higher education quality assurance and accreditation.	There are 9 Board members appointed by the Minister of Education - 2 representatives of the Ministry of Education; 1 human resource expert; 1 representative of the major employers' organisation; 1 representative of the major labour organisation; 2 general members at the Minister's discretion; and the Executive Director and the head of the public service who are ex officio members.	The EQAA's functions in the Act are to register institutions; accredit institutions and programmes; recognise and determine equivalence of foreign awards and programmes; confer institutional title; advise the Minister on issues of quality in higher education; facilitate free movement of skilled nationals in the CSME; develop a unified credit-based system for higher education programmes; discharge functions assigned by the Minister.	The EQAA is headed by an Executive Director appointed the Minister.	<u>Register post secondary and tertiary education institutions</u> Following an application from institutions seeking authorisation to operate, a review by professionals or peers including a site visit informs an evaluation report which is submitted to the Board for a decision. Fees are charged based on direct cost of resources for evaluation. Service is mandatory for all institutions. <u>Accredit post secondary and tertiary education institutions and programmes.</u> BAC intends to begin this service shortly but the QA methodologies have not yet been finalised. <u>Conferment of Institutional Title.</u> While the Council has the responsibility to confer titles on institutions offering higher education services, the QA methodologies have not been finalised and this service is not yet available. <u>Recognise and determine equivalence of foreign/ transnational qualifications and programmes.</u> Equivalence assessment and recognition of qualifications are done through a paper-based review. BAC also issues certificates of recognition to eligible nationals to facilitate their free movement throughout the CSME.	Since 2005 the Barbados Accreditation Council has registered 37 institutions.
				The Board makes the final decision on all awards by the EQAA.		There are 11 full-time professional and support staff.		
						The Ministry of Education funds the EQAA. In addition to the funding received by the Ministry, the EQAA earns revenue from fees and other revenue-generating activities.		
GUYANA	There are about 25 post secondary and tertiary institutions in Guyana. These include three universities, the National University of Guyana and 2 private offshore institutions. Other tertiary and post secondary institutions include; two public technical institutes, one national teacher training college and a few private IT and business schools. Approximately 15,000 students are enrolled in higher education in Guyana.	The establishment of the external QA system in Guyana as outlined in the national legislation is intended to expand access to higher education; make institutions more accountable to stakeholders; regulate the higher education sector; facilitate international mobility of national graduates; improve quality of local higher education; facilitate the establishment of the CSME; administer examination councils; and confer academic awards on eligible Guyana nationals.	The Accreditation Council Act (Act # 12 of 2004) created the legal framework for the establishment of the National Accreditation Council of Guyana as a corporate body.	There are 15 Board members comprising 3 representatives from tertiary institutions and the TVET sector; 2 representatives from professional bodies; 2 representatives of employers; 1 representative of the Ministry of Education; 2 general members at the discretion of the Minister; and the Executive Director who is an ex-officio member.	The EQAA's functions in the Act are to register institutions; accredit institutions and programmes; recognise and determine equivalence of foreign awards and programmes; advise the Minister on issues of quality in higher education; facilitate free movement of skilled nationals in the CSME; develop a unified credit-based system for higher education programmes; discharge functions assigned by the Minister; administer examination councils; and confer degrees, diplomas, certificates and other academic awards on those who have pursued higher education programmes.	Initial operations have been suspended and a new Executive Director is to be appointed by the Minister of Education.	The Accreditation Council of Guyana does not offer services to the higher education sector at this time.	
				The Board is empowered to make the final decision on all awards by the EQAA.		Staff arrangements for the EQAA have not yet been finalised. Administrative duties are performed by staff of the Ministry of Education.		
						All funding is currently provided by the Ministry of Education.		

COUNTRY	HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR	PURPOSE FOR EXTERNAL QA SYSTEM	EQAA LEGISLATION	EQAA GOVERNANCE	FUNCTIONS OF EQAA	EQAA RESOURCES	EQAA SERVICES	EQAA PERFORMANCE
JAMAICA	There are approximately 60 tertiary institutions in Jamaica. There are thirteen universities including the University of the West Indies Mona Campus and the University of Technology Jamaica, along with three local private universities and several other private offshore universities. The private tertiary and post secondary institutions represent the majority of the higher education sector in Jamaica. Approximately 50,000 students are enrolled in higher education in Jamaica.	The establishment of the external QA system in Jamaica as outlined in the national legislation is intended to increase higher education opportunities for nationals; regulate the higher education sector; confer academic awards and distinctions on eligible Jamaican nationals; and improve the quality of local higher education.	The University Council of Jamaica Act (Act# 23 of 1987) did not fully establish the Council as an External Quality Assurance Agency but empowered it to grant degree awarding powers to institutions. This Council has functioned as an accrediting body and the Act is being amended to give effect to this role.	There are 15 Council members appointed by the Minister; 6 representing institutions including the University of the West Indies; 9 other members representing professional bodies, the Ministry of Education and general public; the head of the tertiary institutions association and the Executive Director are ex officio members. This Board is empowered to make the final decisions on all awards to be granted by the EQAA.	The EQAA's functions in the Act authorizes the Council to confer academic awards and distinctions on those who have pursued higher education studies in Jamaica; and improve the quality of local higher education .The Council has actively used this mandate to register institutions; accredit programmes; and recognise and determine the equivalence of foreign awards and programmes.	The EQAA is headed by an Executive Director appointed the Board. There are 13 full-time professional and support staff. The Ministry of Education funds the EQAA. In addition to the funding received by the Ministry, the EQAA earns revenue from fees and other revenue-generating activities.	Register post secondary and tertiary education institutions. Following an application from the institution an external review including a site visit by peers and/or professionals inform an evaluation report which is submitted to the Board for decision. Fees are charged based on direct cost of resources for evaluation. This service is voluntary for institutions.	Since 1988 the University Council of Jamaica (UCJ) has registered over 48 institutions.
							Accredit tertiary education programmes. Following a self- assessment submission by the institution, a review by peers or consultants including a site visit, inform an evaluation report which is submitted to the Board for a decision. Fees are charged based on the direct cost of resources for the evaluation. This service is voluntary for institutions.	The UCJ has accredited 149 programmes.
							Recognise and determine equivalence of foreign/ transnational programmes. Equivalence assessment is done through a paper-based review. Transnational programme recognition quality assurance methodology is the same as programme accreditation but applies to offshore universities. Fees are charged based on direct cost of resources for evaluation. Service is voluntary.	
ST VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES	There are about five tertiary institutions in St Vincent and the Grenadines. These include The University of the West Indies Open Campus, a private offshore medical college, a public community college and two other private post secondary institutions. The higher education student population in St Vincent and the Grenadines is approximately 2,000.	The establishment of the external QA system in St. Vincent and the Grenadines as outlined in the Act is intended to make higher education more accountable to stakeholders; increase higher education opportunities for nationals; regulate the higher education sector; facilitate international mobility of national graduates; improve quality of local higher education; and facilitate the establishment of the CSME.	The Further and Higher Education Accreditation Act (Act # 35 of 2006) established the National Accreditation Board of St Vincent and the Grenadines as a corporate body.	There are 21 Board members appointed by the Minister which include the Chief Personnel & Education Officers; permanent secretaries in the Ministries of Education and Health; the Bar, medical, teaching, engineering, architectural, & accounting associations representatives; 1 representative of tertiary institutions; 1 business sector representative; 1 representative of the Attorney General; 1 TVET sector representative; 1 workers association representative, a National Training Agency representative, and the Executive Director who is an ex officio member. This Board must seek the Minister's approval for all decisions with respect to awards by the EQAA on quality assurance evaluations	The EQAA's functions in the Act are to register all institutions; accredit institutions and programmes; recognise and determine equivalence of foreign awards and programmes; advise the Minister on the award of degree-granting powers to institutions; advise the Minister on issues of quality in higher education; facilitate free movement of skilled nationals in the CSME; establish a qualifications framework as the basis for a unified credit -based system for higher education programmes; discharge functions assigned by Minister.	The EQAA is headed by an Executive Director appointed by the Board on the advice of the Cabinet. There is currently one professional staff member. The EQAA is funded by the Ministry of Education.	The Accreditation Council of St Vincent and the Grenadines has not yet begun to offer services to the higher education sector in that country.	

COUNTRY	HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR	PURPOSE FOR EXTERNAL QA SYSTEM	EQAA LEGISLATION	EQAA GOVERNANCE	FUNCTIONS OF EQAA	EQAA RESOURCES	EQAA SERVICES	EQAA PERFORMANCE
ST KITTS AND NEVIS	St Kitts and Nevis places significant emphasis on education tourism. There are six offshore universities, a University of the West Indies Open Campus site, and one public community college. There are approximately 3,000 higher education students enrolled in St. Kitts and Nevis.	The establishment of the external QA system in St Kitts and Nevis as outlined in the legislation is intended to make higher education more accountable to stakeholders; regulate the higher education sector; and improve the quality of local higher education.	The Saint Christopher and Nevis Accreditation of institutions Act (Act # 21 of 1999 amended in 2001) created the legal framework for the establishment of the Saint Christopher and Nevis Accreditation Board as a entity within the Ministry of Education with responsibility for higher education quality assurance and accreditation.	This body includes representatives from the ministries of education, finance, planning, health, the premier's office, the legal department, the public Community College and other persons that the Minister may appoint from time to time.	The functions of this body outlined in the Act are to accredit higher education institutions and advise the Minister on the granting of degree-awarding powers to institutions seeking to offer higher education programmes.	The body is headed by a chairperson appointed by the Minister.	Accredit higher education institutions. Following an application, institutions prepare a self- assessment submission, a team of professionals review the submission and conduct a site visit which informs the evaluation report that is submitted to the Board. The Board makes a recommendation to the Minister who has the final decision. Accredited institutions are then authorised to confer degrees in their name.	Since its establishment, the St. Kitts and Nevis Accreditation Board has accredited 8 institutions.
						There is one administrative professional assigned to support the work of the Board and the staff of the related ministries performs additional technical and administrative duties as required by the Board to carry out its mandate.		
						The Ministry of Education funds all operations of the Board.		
TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO	There are approximately 120 higher education institutions. The University of the West Indies, St Augustine Campus, the University of Trinidad and Tobago and another private faith-based university. Additionally, there are over 100 private tertiary and post secondary institutions. Only 8 of these institutions are public and over 50% of the private tertiary and post secondary institutions in Trinidad and Tobago offer transnational programmes. There are approximately 70,000 students enrolled in higher education in Trinidad and Tobago.	The establishment of the external QA system in Trinidad and Tobago as outlined in the Act was intended to make higher education more accountable to stakeholders; regulate the higher education sector; facilitate international mobility of national graduates; improve quality of local higher education; and facilitate the establishment of the CSME.	The Accreditation Council of Trinidad & Tobago Act (Act# 16 of 2004; amended in 2008) established the Accreditation Council of Trinidad and Tobago as a corporate body for the purpose of higher education quality assurance and accreditation.	There are 13 Council members appointed by the President - 3 representing tertiary institutions; 2 quality assurance experts; 2 representing professional bodies; 1 Ministry representative; 1 employers' representative; 1 trade union representative; 2 members of the general public; and the Executive Director as an ex officio member.	The EQAA's functions in the Act are to register all institutions; accredit institutions and programmes; recognise and determine equivalence of foreign awards and programmes; confer protected institutional titles; advise the Minister on issues of quality in higher education; facilitate free movement of skilled nationals in the CSME; develop a unified credit-based system for higher education programmes; discharge functions assigned by Minister.	EQAA is headed by an Executive Director appointed by the President on the advice of the Minister.	Register post secondary and tertiary education institutions. Following an application from the institution seeking authorisation to operate, an external review including a site visit by peers and/or professionals informs an evaluation report which is submitted to the Board for the final decision. Fees are charged based on direct cost of resources for site visit plus a 20% administrative charge. Registration is mandatory for all institutions.	The Accreditation Council has registered 78 post secondary tertiary institutions and one local awarding body since 2004.
						There are currently 42 full-time professional and support staff members at the EQAA.	Accredit post secondary and tertiary education institutions and programmes. Following a self- assessment submission, an external review including a site visit informs an evaluation report which is submitted to the Board for decision. Fees are charged based on direct cost of resources for site visit plus a 20% administrative charge. Accreditation is voluntary.	7 institutions are in the accreditation process as Candidates for Accreditation.
						The EQAA is funded by the Ministry of Science, Technology and Tertiary Education. In addition to Ministry subventions the EQAA also earns revenue from fees and other revenue-generating activities.	Conferment of Institutional title Following an application, a peer review including a site visit informs an evaluation report which is submitted to Board for decision. Fees are charged based on direct cost of resources for site visit plus a 20% administrative charge. This is mandatory for institutions seeking to carry protected titles.	Institutional titles have been conferred on six institutions seeking to carry protected titles. Two requests to carry the title of 'university' have been denied.
							Recognise and determine equivalence of foreign/ transnational qualifications and programmes Equivalence assessment and recognition of qualifications are done through a paper-based review and research on the qualification.	The Council issues over 1200 statements of recognition annually.
		Recognise Institutions offering transnational programmes locally Following an application from the institution seeking authorisation to offer the transnational programme locally, an external review including a site visit by peers and/or professionals is conducted. This informs an evaluation report submitted to the Board for a decision. Fees are charged based on direct cost of resources for site visit plus a 20% administrative charge. This is mandatory for all transnational programmes offered in Trinidad and Tobago.	13 transnational programme offerings and 4 foreign awarding bodies have been recognized by the Council since 2004.					
		The Board is empowered to make all final decisions on QA awards by the EQAA.						

V. A MODEL FOR EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES (EQAAs) IN SMALL STATES

The comparative analysis in *Section IV* demonstrates several areas of commonality and divergence among the EQAAs that have been established in the Caribbean Community. In this section the authors of this paper examine some of the core issues and propose the following model for the establishment of EQAAs in small states.

Purposes for External Quality Assurance Agencies

Many of the CARICOM countries that have moved to develop external quality assurance agencies within the past decade have done so in the context of the CARICOM initiative to establish the CARICOM Single Market and Economy (CSME) and the priority it placed on increasing quality higher education provision throughout the region and removing obstacles to intra-regional movement of skilled persons. The need for improvement in the quality of graduates produced by regional institutions; greater accountability to stakeholders; increased regulation to manage the expansion of private tertiary institutions; and the desire to demonstrate international comparability of standards (driven by increasing scrutiny of regional qualifications in an increasingly globalised environment) are among the major purposes identified.

The structure of the model adopted by any country is directly related to the purposes for the national quality assurance system. The drive to increase higher education provision can potentially be in conflict with a greater emphasis on accountability, quality improvement and regulation. If the desire to facilitate expansion of access to higher education is over-emphasised by national authorities, the rigour of external evaluation may be compromised as the pursuit of ‘quantity over quality’ can pose challenges for decision-makers. It is for this reason that there must be separation between the roles played by government (as investor in higher education for national development) and EQAAs which have responsibility for independent evaluation and judgement on quality.

EQAA legal status and governing arrangements

Many of the fifteen CARICOM territories have either passed legislation to introduce external quality assurance systems or are currently drafting similar legislation. Some territories have gone the route of establishing EQAAs as independent corporate bodies accountable to the State through the Parliament, while others have sought only to appoint committees or taskforces comprising representatives of education and related ministries. Where corporate bodies have been established there is significant variation in the composition of the governing bodies. The composition of some governing bodies demonstrates a commitment to wide stakeholder representation while others are limited to government appointees and senior public servants. A lack of autonomy in decision-making and over-representation by government on some bodies has the potential to create the perception that the EQAA is “an agent of the State” (Alleyne and Stafford, 2008). In this context, these perceptions can reduce the level of credibility that the

EQAA achieves among institutional stakeholders and the wider international community as an independent body whose decision-making is free from the influence of third parties.

The authors propose that the autonomy of the EQAA, particularly with respect to decision-making, should be preserved while general oversight over its operations and its effectiveness can be maintained by government authorities. It is suggested that the EQAA be established as an independent corporate body with a Governing Board whose members are appointed by the Head of State (President or Governor-General). The Board should comprise between 10-15 members, with at least one third of the membership representing both private and public higher education institutions. The remaining two thirds should be divided among professional bodies, employers', labour and government and include a representative of the public. The executive head of the EQAA should be an ex-officio member of the Board. This composition of the Board will ensure that a wide range of interests are represented and a variety of viewpoints will bring greater value to the decision-making process. The Board should have the final decision on all matters including external evaluations and the decisions of the Board should be subject only to its documented appeal process or judicial review.

EQAA functions and services

Some recently established bodies in CARICOM have been focusing their attention primarily on developing systems for:

- institutional accreditation;
- assessment of qualifications earned from institutions abroad; and
- facilitation of free movement by qualified nationals in the Caribbean Single Market and Economy (CSME) (by the issuance of a 'Skills Certificate' giving approval for their qualifications to be accepted by employers in another CARICOM country).

Others have been given broader mandates which also include:

- registration of institutions (which ensures that they meet minimum standards);
- specialised accreditation (of professional programmes);
- conferment of institutional title or regulation of degree-granting powers (on new institutions seeking to establish themselves as universities or use other protected titles);
- recognition of foreign or transnational institutions;
- assessment of the equivalence of qualifications;
- evaluation and validation of new programmes; and
- development of unified credit-based systems for their higher education sectors.

Although most of the EQAAs in CARICOM are still in the embryonic stages of development, a few have forged ahead to provide a wide range of services. These EQAAs are charged with the responsibility for carrying out multiple functions which, in developed countries with more resources and more expansive higher education sectors, would be performed by different

agencies - both public and private. As a consequence of the limited resources available to the regional territories, it is essential that they concentrate their efforts on key strategic areas. This model proposes that national EQAAs focus on:

- Registration
- Regulation of degree granting powers or conferment of institutional titles
- Institutional accreditation
- Specialised accreditation (in collaboration with professional bodies and regional partners)
- Recognition of foreign institutions and awarding bodies seeking to offer cross-border or distance programmes

The provision of multiple services will continue to present significant resource challenges for some EQAAs but the authors believe that this is necessary if small states are to use higher education as a catalyst for growth and development. While the authors believe that voluntary submission to accreditation is critical to meaningful and sustainable quality improvement, they are also of the view that a mandatory regulatory mechanism should be employed to ensure that all institutions operating in the sector meet minimum standards for the provision of educational services. This is achieved through the 'registration' process which is compulsory in several States. It provides a mechanism to ensure that the public is protected from poor quality and fraudulent providers are appropriately dealt with.

Conferment of institutional title, or regulation of degree-granting powers, is closely related to mandatory registration since it protects students from poor quality, fraudulent or unsustainable institutions by evaluating their capacity to offer quality education at the relevant level prior to permitting them to establish their operations. Pursuant to the award of degree-granting powers and the assurance that an institution has the capacity to offer quality higher education, EQAAs should provide the impetus and support for institutions to pursue voluntary institutional accreditation. This external evaluation process would go beyond accessing capacity to evaluate the institution's success in achieving its educational and other stated outcomes. Specialised accreditation should also be offered in collaboration with national and regional professional bodies and specialised regional accreditation agencies.

Finally, the evaluation and recognition of foreign institutions and awarding bodies seeking to offer cross-border or distance education has become a matter of increasing importance for small states, such as those in CARICOM, in the context of globalisation, the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) and the rapid improvement in Information Communication Technology (with the attendant opportunities for fraud).

In general, prioritisation of the services to be offered by EQAAs should be focussed on areas in which there is an assessed need at the national or regional level (particularly when the service cannot be provided by an existing organisation), and also on areas in which the national EQAA has acquired significant expertise that can be employed nationally as well as shared with other countries.

EQAA financial and human resources

Financial resources

The model of a privately run EQAA with a single responsibility, which is characteristic of countries like the United States of America with its system of regional accreditation bodies for institutional accreditation, seems less feasible in small states where revenue exclusively from fees and other activities is unlikely to sustain and support the expansion of these national agencies. In small states, governments are often the only available source of funding to initiate and sustain external quality assurance systems. This is brought into greater focus with mini states whose governments are unable to allocate adequate resources to successfully achieve and sustain full operations of an EQAA. In a regional context it may not be necessary for each state to establish a national EQAA (as suggested in earlier discussion on the Caribbean Community Accreditation Agency for Education and Training in *Section III* of this paper). The authors support an arrangement at the regional level that co-ordinates national initiatives, pools resources and is managed by a regional coordinating agency (this proposal will be discussed in detail in *Section VI* of this paper).

The development of EQAAs in CARICOM member states is heavily contingent on the financial resources available to these embryonic bodies. Since they are funded by the State this places an increased burden on institutions and ultimately on tax payers. Significant strides have been made by countries like Trinidad and Tobago in establishing the Accreditation Council of Trinidad and Tobago (the largest EQAA in CARICOM with a full-time staff of forty-two). One contributing factor may be that Trinidad and Tobago's economy has experienced sustained economic growth for the past fourteen years buoyed by a profitable energy sector.

The autonomous, publicly-funded corporate body proposed in this model, would be funded by government subventions and grants, donations, fees for services, and revenue generated from public fora like conferences or workshops. EQAAs however, should as far as possible, seek to become financially self-sufficient in the long term as this may impact positively their professional autonomy and the integrity of the operations.

Human resources

Human resource capacity is another area of major concern for EQAAs in small states. Quality assurance professionals in higher education within CARICOM territories are in short supply and they are demanding higher compensation for their services. As the region has moved to establish national EQAAs, some of the challenges include attracting and retaining competent professional staff. Many EQAAs will be required to expend significant resources in training and retention of key personnel. The number and skill levels of staff required by EQAAs in small states will depend on their service offerings and the size of the higher education sector. This model stops short of proposing any numbers or ratios with respect to staffing but suggests that EQAAs maintain sufficient professional and support staff to ensure that institutions and other stakeholders can access services and support in an efficient and effective manner. Failure to do

so can undermine the integrity of the system and negatively impact the sustainability of quality assurance initiatives. This can ultimately lead to loss of credibility of the EQAA and the quality assurance system in general.

External evaluation methodologies

Methods of external evaluation being considered or adopted in the region vary according to the type of institution and the focus or purpose of the evaluation. Major elements include:

- standard application forms
- self-study processes
- external peer reviews (including site visits)
- professional reviews (by professionals contracted by the EQAA as consultant-evaluators)
- EQAA staff inspections

Methodologies that are overly prescriptive and rigid, risk eroding the autonomy and integrity of the institution or programme it seeks to evaluate, while those that are not well- documented or appear to be expressly subjective, risk being perceived as lacking rigour and objectivity. EQAAs must achieve a delicate balance.

This paper endorses an external evaluation model for key services discussed earlier comprising three main stages:

- I. Self-evaluation or self-study (against broad clearly defined criteria as the central feature of the external evaluation process)
- II. External review (peer or professional) including site visits
- III. Evaluation report to the EQAA (completed by reviewers and including recommendations on the status to be awarded).

Self-evaluation as the central component of external evaluation is recommended because its absence may result in a prescriptive exercise in which too much is imposed on the institution and emphasis is purely on compliance, thereby stifling creativity and innovation within higher education institutions. The self-evaluation process is not without challenges. One of these is the increasingly competitive nature of higher education as private, “for-profit” or commercial provisions expand. The EQAA must implement policies and practices to ensure that self-evaluation does not simply become an exercise of self-presentation to the external team but remain a valuable tool for rigorous assessment and institutional quality improvement. There is also the challenge of overcoming institutional cynicism for the accreditation process. Within the context of this model, these challenges are addressed through the collaborative relationships that EQAAs must establish with institutions by guiding, training and supporting them throughout the process.

The relatively small pool of reviewers within each territory from which to choose (when issues of sector size, conflict of interest and areas of professional expertise and specialisation are considered) creates a need for EQAAs to expand the body of reviewers beyond the peer group. This model proposes that the regional coordinating body maintain a readily accessible database

of trained, expert reviewers, who are familiar with the processes adopted throughout the region. EQAAs would have access to this pool and the database should include those with expertise in higher education and experienced professionals in a wide range of specialised fields. While emphasis would be placed on professionals within the Community, international expertise should also be sought. One of the issues that will emerge with this model is the cost to the institutions of fees to be paid to evaluators for their work. Reviewers should be paid an honorarium and not a fee for professional services. Over time, a culture needs to be developed that encourages professionals to view their contribution to the evaluation exercises as an opportunity to contribute to human development, in general, and to nation-building and regional development.

The final aspect of the model is the preparation of an evaluation report by the review team following the site visit. This report should relate the institution's self-study report to the EQAA's criteria and the site visit observations. It presents evidence to support the recommendations for improvement and the status to be awarded to the institution (or programme). The institution must receive and review the report for accuracy prior to any decision by the governing board. The institution has the right to appeal the decision of the EQAA.

VI. A REGIONAL QUALITY ASSURANCE FRAMEWORK FOR SMALL STATES

Universally, accreditation is the most highly regarded and widely used method of external quality assurance and its role is increasing steadily in importance in the Caribbean region. Quality assurance takes place at the sectoral level (by accrediting bodies and government agencies) and at the institutional level (by tertiary level institutions - TLIs). This section of the paper presents a Regional Quality Assurance Framework (RQAF) that adopts an integrated approach in which quality assurance is a shared responsibility. The four-tiered RQAF illustrates that at the regulatory level (*Component 1*), accrediting bodies and/or government agencies (e.g. Ministries of Education) have responsibility for regulating and guiding the establishment and management of TLIs. The second major aspect of the framework is the responsibility of TLIs to develop and maintain systems for assessing, assuring and improving their own quality at both the institutional and programmatic levels. At the third level, national accrediting bodies are primarily responsible for the establishment and maintenance of robust, accountable, transparent and operationally efficient quality assurance systems of external review. Finally, at the fourth level, a regional body plays a critical role in co-ordinating national initiatives and facilitating collaboration and resource sharing. The proposed Regional Quality Assurance Framework (RQAF) which is an expansion of a model discussed in a report to the Caribbean Tourism Organization (CTO) entitled '*Proposal for the development of a Regional Quality Assurance Framework and Guidelines for tertiary level institutions in the Caribbean*' (Alleyne, 2007) is outlined diagrammatically in Figure 1.0 (on the next page).

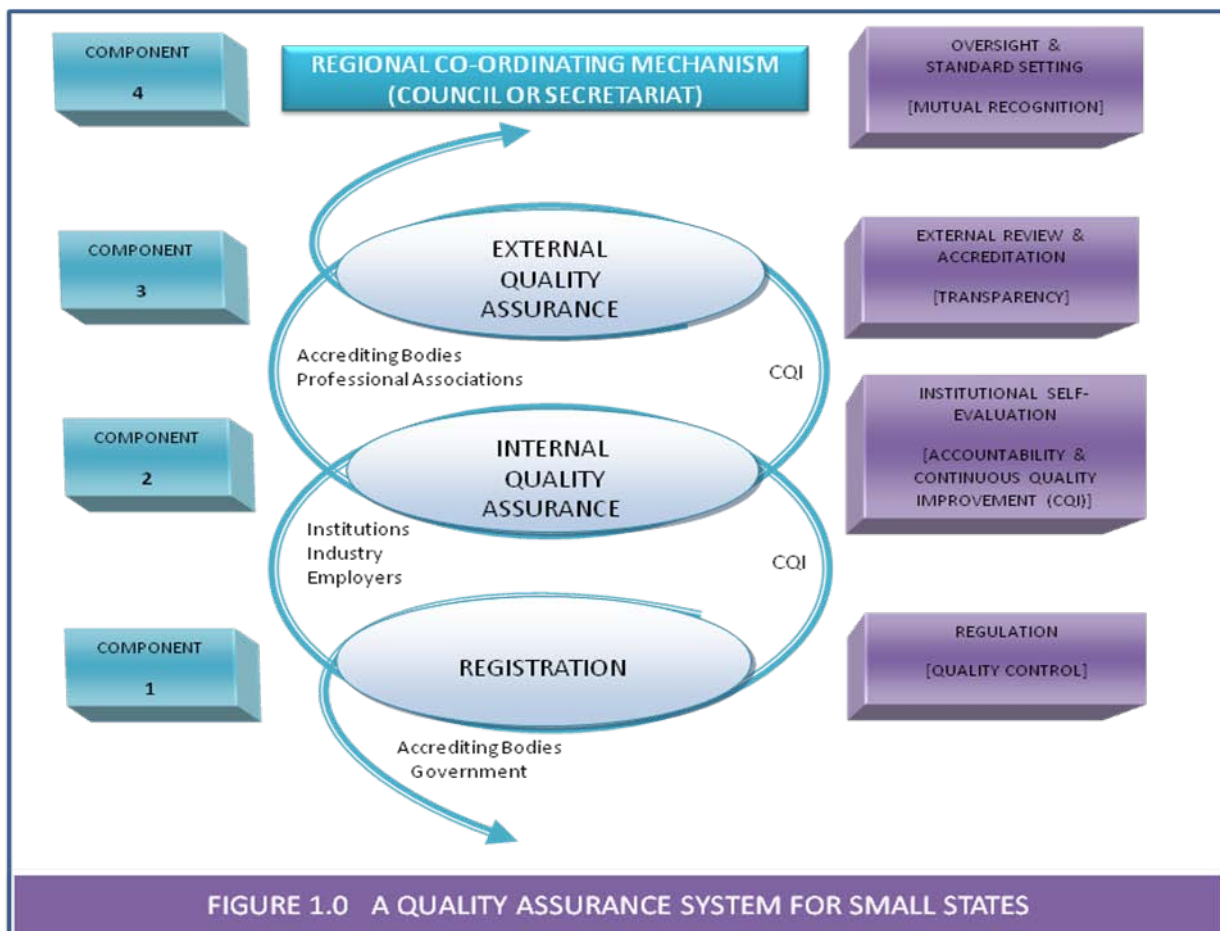
The Regional Quality Assurance Framework Explained

In essence, the figure appears to be a spring or coil. This form was selected for the RQAF because it is characterised by flexibility, fluidity, resilience and responsiveness that enables it to change or adapt in the context of its changing environment. It also represents a continuum in which the three core components are interconnected and integrated into the framework.

The three core components of the RQAF are:

- **Registration**
- **Internal Quality Assurance**
- **External Quality Assurance**

While these three components operate at the national level in individual countries, there is a fourth component which functions at the regional level where groups of small states (such as CARICOM) exist.



The RQAF is process-driven and the key processes on which it is founded are quality control (regulation); quality evaluation (internal and external review); and quality enhancement (improvement). The processes are cyclical and all are geared towards continuous quality improvement (CQI).

- Quality Control ensures that institutions meet the minimum quality requirements in order to protect the interests of students and other stakeholders.
- Quality Evaluation (internal) involves TLIs in examining and assessing standards of organisational and programmatic quality through a process of self-evaluation and with a focus on CQI.
- Quality Evaluation (external) involves peer/expert review and validation of the quality assurance of educational inputs, processes and outputs of the TLIs, by an entity external to the institution.
- Quality Enhancement institutionalises the use of feedback on organisational performance to inform and underpin institutional development.

Component 1 - Registration

Purpose: Regulation

Primary Outcome: Quality Control – Ensuring compliance with minimum standards.

Function: The foundation upon which the Regional Quality Assurance Framework rests is the system for registering TLIs (as discussed in the model proposed in *Section V* of this paper) and, in so doing, regulating the quality of tertiary education at the sectoral level to protect the interests of students, governments and other investors and all stakeholders. As explained above, in some CARICOM countries at present, a registration process is in effect in the countries' quality assurance systems. The registration process can be implemented by the national accrediting body as in the case of Barbados, Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago or by a Government Ministry. It must be supported by legislation to be effective. Registration is compulsory by law in Trinidad and Tobago. Through registration, the State:

- Ensures that minimum standards are established and maintained by all TLIs (both local and foreign)
- Protects the public from poor quality education
- Safeguards and enhances the reputation of tertiary education in the region
- Promotes quality that conforms to norms of good practice in tertiary education globally
- Provides the public with reliable information on tertiary education quality

- Regulates cross-border or transnational tertiary education

The registration process in each country should be developed and implemented with sufficient rigor to make it comparable to the eligibility phase of the accreditation process (in systems such as those in the United States of America and some Commonwealth countries). Institutions that meet the criteria for registration and have produced graduates of their degree programmes can be eligible to apply for accreditation. Registration therefore becomes the first step towards accreditation.

Key Players: The key players with respect to the regulatory component of the proposed RQAF are national accrediting bodies, government agencies and the TLIs. The government agency may be a ministry, division or unit with responsibility for the country's tertiary education sector. The accrediting body may be established or initiated by Government, through an Act of Parliament, but governed independently by a board responsible for the functioning of the body. In countries such as the USA and the Philippines, accrediting agencies are fully independent of the State in terms of their establishment and to a large extent their functioning. At the institutional level, TLIs must establish quality management systems that ensure compliance with quality standards and criteria.

Critical Steps

Critical steps in the establishment and/or strengthening of a national regulatory process for TLIs are:

- i Enactment of appropriate legislation to establish a quality assurance system or review of existing legislation.
- ii Allocation of responsibility for implementing the registration process and monitoring compliance to an appropriate agency within the framework of the legislation.
- iii Development of minimum standards and criteria for the registration of TLIs.
- iv Design of a registration process with policies and procedures that ensure initial and continued compliance by TLIs with the quality standards and criteria.
- v Allocation of resources at the sectoral level to enable the designated regulatory agency to carry out its functions effectively.
- vi Technical guidance and resource allocation to support TLIs in the development of quality management systems to meet the requirements for registration.

Component 2 - Internal Quality Assurance

Purpose: Institutional Self-Evaluation

Primary Outcomes: Accountability and Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) – Optimising outcomes for students and benefits to stakeholders and implementing effective and ongoing improvement plans.

Function: Government and other investors in tertiary education are growing increasingly concerned about ‘value for money’. TLIs are being held accountable for providing evidence of outcomes of the educational process, in particular, student learning outcomes. Internal quality assurance systems should be developed and structured by TLIs to examine, assess and monitor performance related to their inputs, processes and outcomes at both the institutional and programmatic levels. A key component of internal quality assurance is self-evaluation or self-study. Through self-evaluation or self-study, the TLI can evaluate the extent to which it is fulfilling its mission and identify ways in which it can improve its performance. Self-evaluation essentially involves a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) as the institution assesses its effectiveness against pre-determined quality criteria. Since self-evaluation is an integral part of the accreditation process, it creates a link between internal quality assurance by TLIs and external quality assurance by an accrediting body. The self-study report forms the basis of an on-site review process conducted by a team of experts external to the institution.

Key Players: The key players with respect to internal quality assurance are the TLIs, students, industry representatives and employers. The institutions are required to engage in honest, deep and self-critical analysis of all aspects of their operations in order for self-evaluation to yield meaningful results and inform problem-solving and ongoing quality improvement. The internal quality assurance system must collect and use feedback from enrolled students as customers and key stakeholders such as graduates and employers of graduates, in order to ensure that the TLIs are effectively meeting their needs.

Critical Steps

In order to establish an effective internal quality assurance system, a TLI should:

- i Clearly define a mission with strategic objectives and a process by which the fulfilment of these objectives will be reviewed and the mission updated accordingly.
- ii Develop and maintain an organisational structure for management of the institution in which responsibility for quality assurance is identified and assigned, and adequate resources allocated.
- iii Design and implement policies, procedures and practices to ensure institutional effectiveness with regard to:

- mission
 - governance and administration
 - academic standards
 - human resources
 - teaching and learning
 - physical facilities
 - research and scholarship
 - community involvement
 - financial viability
 - improvement and development plans
- iv Develop an institutional research capability that identifies quality indicators and collects, analyses and interprets data that can be used as measures of organisational performance and success, and inform evidence-based decision-making.

Component 3 - External Quality Assurance

Purpose: External Review and Accreditation

Primary Outcomes: Ensuring transparency, gaining stakeholder confidence and assuring quality outcomes and commitment to quality.

Function: Universally, an independent, neutral and transparent system of accreditation is the foundation of a reputable and credible tertiary education sector. Accreditation is defined by Sanyal and Martin (2007) as “the outcome of a process by which a governmental, parastatal or private body (accreditation agency) evaluates the quality of a higher education institution as a whole, or a specific higher education programme/course, in order to formally recognize it as having met certain predetermined criteria or standards and award a quality label”. TLIs rely on the scrutiny of accrediting bodies for external validation of their quality. The results of the external review are important to the TLIs in terms of gaining and maintaining public confidence in the outcomes of tertiary education, and for guiding and supporting institutional quality improvement. Quality enhancement (through continuous quality improvement) is one of the major benefits of the accreditation process. National accrediting bodies play a significant role in the development of a quality culture in the tertiary education sector by hosting workshops and conferences and producing and disseminating information through newsletters, bulletins, research publications and other documents.

Key Players: The key players with respect to external quality assurance are the national accrediting bodies; regional governments, ministries and government departments; professional associations; and regulatory (licensing) bodies. It is important that national accrediting bodies maintain autonomy in their operations, decisions and recommendations so as to ensure that they are not influenced by any third party such as the TLIs, government or stakeholders. Professional associations and licensing bodies should collaborate with the national accrediting bodies in the region to ensure that standards of education and training in specialised fields meet the requirements for (licensed) practice in the professions.

Critical Steps

In order to establish an efficient and effective external quality assurance system, national accrediting bodies should:

- i have clearly defined and transparent procedures for quality assurance and accreditation.
- ii assist TLIs in establishing internal quality assurance systems through self-evaluation (self-study)
- iii create an enabling environment in which TLIs are guided in capacity-building and quality enhancement activities
- iv establish effective linkages with relevant government authorities and institutions
- v develop policies to guide the relationships between EQAAs and professional associations and/or licensing (regulatory) bodies particularly with regard to programmatic/specialised accreditation
- vi develop policies and systems to provide reliable and up-to-date information on their processes and decisions to all stakeholders
- vii collaborate with other regional and international agencies in developing the competencies of a cadre of peer reviewers to participate in the external reviews across the region
- viii ensure that they allocate sufficient resources for their own institutional strengthening and capacity-building activities
- ix submit to periodic systematic external review of their own operations and activities by an appropriate authority.

Component 4 - Regional Co-ordinating Mechanism

Purpose: Oversight and Standard setting

Primary Outcomes: Ensuring system integrity and facilitating mutual recognition.

Function: In regions with small states characterised by limited human, physical and financial resources it may not be necessary for every island or country to establish a national accrediting body. Resource use can be maximised if bodies established in larger territories, or those with the resources to sustain them, serve the needs of other countries. The regional council or secretariat should co-ordinate the efforts of national bodies to provide services to neighbouring territories. In order for this to be effective the regional body should also engage in initiatives geared towards setting common standards for registration and accreditation that can be adopted by national bodies. It should also provide technical support for capacity-building to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of national bodies. The training of peer reviewers, for example, can be facilitated at the regional level and a pool created from which all countries can benefit. Finally, the regional body should also participate in external reviews of the operations of national bodies and in negotiating mutual recognition agreements intra- and extra-regionally.

Key Players: The key players with respect to establishing the regional body are governments, national accrediting bodies and specialised accrediting bodies. The governments of the region must be committed to integration and multilateral co-operation. The national and regional bodies are required to seek harmonisation of policies and practices and to establish collaborative relationships for resource and information sharing.

Critical Steps

In order to establish a Regional Council/Secretariat, governments of the region must arrive at consensus and decide on common action through a process that promotes unity and co-operation while also respecting sovereignty and territorial independence. Governments of the region should:

- i. Engage in national dialogue on the issue with all stakeholders as well as dialogue with other countries in the region.
- ii. Design an organisational structure that is aligned to the functions of the body, that is adaptable and sustainable over time.
- iii. Establish sources of funding to establish and maintain the operations of the regional body.
- iv. Develop a legally binding inter-governmental agreement that clearly identifies the objectives of the body as well as its powers, functions and details of its operation.
- v. Establish a specific timeframe for implementation of the agreement and an action plan for establishment of the regional body.

VII. CONCLUSION

This paper makes a significant contribution to expanding the knowledge-base on characteristics of quality assurance systems in the Caribbean Community as a region that is distinct in many respects, with unique characteristics which have created a type of hybrid EQAA. The paper puts forward a model for EQAAs and a Regional Quality Assurance Framework for small states. The authors believe that some of the features of the emergent EQAAs can be adapted in other small states in which the scarcity of resources increases the value of approaches through which countries can derive economies of scale.

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