

IIEP Online Forum on Policy Options for Tertiary Education in Small States
Debate on *Quality Assurance: What are the options?* (18–29 October 2010)

The general objective of this first Online Debate on *Quality Assurance: What are the options?* was to exchange ideas and share experiences among policy-makers at both the national and institutional levels on options for the development of quality assurance (QA) systems for small states.

Rationale and objectives of the debate

Putting in place a quality assurance system is one of the preferred tertiary education reforms in many countries worldwide, including in small states. But many small states somewhat lag behind in the implementation and find it more difficult than larger countries to implement this type of reform.

DISCUSSIONS OF WEEK 1 (18–24 October)

The discussions of Week 1 suggested taking stock of respective experiences in setting up a quality assurance system in participating countries/institutions. Participants were invited to centre their interventions on the four questions in *Box 1*.

Box 1. Week 1 discussion questions

What have been your experiences in setting up a quality assurance (QA) system for the tertiary education sector in your country?

Please describe the QA system which will be/has been set up in your country/institution?

What choices have been made with regard to the functions it performs and the structure which supports the system (multi-purpose vs. multi-level, ministry structure or semi-dependent agency vs. private mechanism)?

Which of the choices are particularly suited to small states? What advice can you give to others to overcome existing difficulties?

During the debate, some hundred messages were registered. Participants from Belize, the Caribbean Accreditation Authority for Education in Medicine and other Health Professions (CAAM-HP), Jamaica (University Council of Jamaica), Maldives (Maldives Qualifications Authority), Samoa (Samoa Qualifications Authority), Seychelles (Seychelles Qualifications Authority), as well as Trinidad and Tobago (Accreditation Council of Trinidad and Tobago) reported extensively on the features of their QA systems. Many others provided inputs on the choices made in their systems, existing difficulties and strategies to overcome them.

The scope of quality assurance in small states

A first set of interventions focused on the question of whether QA in small states should be really different from that in larger states. An agreement emerged rapidly that external quality assurance (EQA) frameworks and quality standards should not be specific for small states, but that modalities for the functioning of the system can be different (importance of regional collaboration, functions and levels to be covered, smaller size of the review teams, etc.).

Rationale for building up EQA systems

A second set of interventions alluded to the underlying reasons for setting up EQA systems. The need for improvement in the quality of graduates produced by tertiary education institutions (TEIs); the greater accountability to stakeholders; the need for increased regulation to respond to 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 globalized environment) were among the major challenges identified by regional policy-makers.

Obstacles in the development of quality assurance systems

Much of the online debate centred on the obstacles faced by countries in setting up quality assurance systems. The most important obstacles mentioned were the following:

- lack of funding;
- unavailability of trained personnel, in particular reviewers who are familiar with the local tertiary education community;
- lack of political will and support from the government;
- little history of QA, absence of a quality culture both at the national and institutional levels;
- difficulty of getting people to buy into the idea because of a lack of understanding of the benefits of QA;
- lack of established policies for tertiary education and/or for quality assurance at the national/regional levels;
- varying legal functions and standards for registration, qualifications recognition and accreditation as an obstacle for stronger regional cooperation.

Options in the systems of quality assurance

The functions

The issue of basic system options was very prominent in the discussion. Indirectly, participants reported on the choices that had been made for the basic functions of their EQA systems. The functions vary from one country to another, but they centre on the following items:

- development of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF);
- registration of programmes and institutions;
- validation and recognition of foreign qualifications;
- accreditation of programmes and institutions;
- others, such as policy advice on tertiary education to the government, and the development of a credit system.

Mandatory vs. voluntary EQA

One question of debate was the issue of whether institutional or programmatic accreditation should be mandatory or voluntary. Most participants said that voluntary would be better (to achieve buy-in from the TEIs), but that appropriate incentives should be set. Others thought

that it should be compulsory because a voluntary system, even in the presence of strong incentives, would certainly miss out due to low quality or fraudulent providers.

It could be concluded that the situation would depend on whether the existing national regulatory framework comprises the compulsory registration of new programmes (including those offered by private providers and franchise programmes), as it is the case in Barbados and Trinidad (but not yet in Jamaica). This would in principle guarantee minimum standards, and programme accreditation could thus be a voluntary procedure certifying 'good practice standards'.

Programme accreditation may also be voluntary if appropriate incentives are set. For instance, in the Maldives the government began to accept candidates to public service only if they are graduates from accredited institutions.

Linking accreditation with funding

A strand of the discussions focused on whether some funding (government tuition fees, student support) should be linked to the registration and accreditation status of tertiary institutions. This seems to be a promising avenue to steer the quality of private TEIs. But in the very small countries, it may be difficult to withdraw the funding from the only public TEI. It should also be kept in mind that, under the General Agreement on Trade and Services (GATS), this could mean that all cross-border providers would become eligible to the same funding from the government.

Institutional vs. programmatic approaches

While programme accreditation is the preferred mechanism in many small states, some participants expressed concern that it is limited to the teaching-learning process and that many areas of institutional life, such as governance procedures and financial management of institutions (in both private and public sectors), are left out of EQA. It was underlined that EQA needs to be seen in a more comprehensive way and that educational institutions must focus on *quality* in all aspects of its operations and not just on accreditation. This pleads for the creation of some kind of institution-related QA mechanism (institutional accreditation or quality audit).

Strategies

Some interesting strategies to overcome difficulties were mentioned in the debate. The importance of having a tertiary policy in place which acknowledges the quality assurance function within the tertiary education (TE) system. Special mention was made of the recent (2008) Botswana TE policy, which makes both EQA and internal quality assurance (IQA) compulsory, and thus sets the framework for collaboration between the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) and TEIs for quality assurance.

Stakeholder involvement at the institutional level was said to be crucial in the process of quality improvement. It was reported from Samoa that much consultation with providers and stakeholders took place on developing policies, procedures and processes for quality assurance which assisted in the development of later legislation.

In Trinidad and Tobago, mechanisms to raise stakeholder involvement at the institutional level include 'Quality Assurance Weeks'. These events are devoted to promulgating the standards of EQAs, promoting good quality assurance practices among TEIs, celebrating and rewarding examples of good practice and achievements of institutions that maintain high standards, and educating members of the public.

Participants felt it was desirable that EQA agencies work with TEIs to help them strengthen their IQA systems, and guide quality improvement. This poses, however, two questions: (1) Do EQA agencies have the capacity to guide quality improvement in TEIs? (2) Where do we draw the line to maintain independence?

DISCUSSION OF WEEK 2 (25–31 October)

The discussions during Week 2 focused on regional and multi-state collaboration. *Box 2* shows the questions posed to participants.

Box 1. Week 2 discussion questions

What is your opinion about multi-state or regional solutions for quality assurance?

Do you think that multi-state solutions for quality assurance bear a particular potential to build or develop existing QA systems in small states?

If yes, how should the regional and the national levels collaborate to ensure the relevance and the cost-effectiveness of the quality assurance system?

Regional and multi-state collaboration

The issue of multi-state and regional cooperation in QA permeated the discussions from the beginning of the debate. It was also the specific topic of Week 2. The following points were made in the debate.

First, it became clear that quality assurance and accreditation across borders is a common feature of the tertiary education landscape in small states. It was said that in the Cook Islands the local TEI has registered with an external authority in New Zealand to become a tertiary provider. As a consequence, QA is ensured by the New Zealand authority. The Jamaica National Accreditation agency mentioned having accredited a programme in Suriname. In Seychelles, the Seychelles Qualifications Authority (SQA) had to urgently deal with the accreditation of an undergraduate medical degree awarded by an institution that has been in existence prior to the birth of the agency. The SQA sought assistance from the South African Medical Council to accredit a medical campus because of the lack of capacity locally, but also to give the accreditation decision credibility. In the Maldives, there are 'externally verified' franchised programmes, and local qualifications with external QA (e.g. a Bachelor of Nursing degree is quality assured by the University of Newcastle). In addition, several participants from small states mentioned that they received the support from neighbouring countries for the development of their EQA systems.

Second, it was underlined that, in the Caribbean and Southern African regions, countries developed their EQA systems in response to regional agreements (CARICOM, SADC). It

was said that many of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) countries have moved to develop external quality assurance agencies (EQAAs) within the past decade in the wider context of the goals of the Caribbean Single Market and Economy (CSME) and the priority placed by CARICOM on increasing quality higher education provision throughout the region and removing obstacles to the intra-regional movement of skilled persons. In the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region in 2009, an agreement was reached that there should be EQA guidelines for the whole region. It is hoped that, by the beginning of 2011, there will be a document which will set out the basic QA elements that should be in place across the SADC region..

Third, the creation of a regional structure for QA and accreditation remains a controversial issue. In the Caribbean, however, the issue seems to encounter a wide consensus. There is already an inter-governmental agreement for the establishment of a 'Caribbean Community Accreditation Agency for Education and Training'. This is the proposed regional body which will play a key role, not in conducting accreditation exercises, but in providing a regulatory framework for monitoring regional standards for accreditation and also for the evaluation and recognition of accrediting bodies throughout the region. But participants from the Indian Ocean were more cautious. While regional cooperation is welcome, the idea of a regional quality assurance body is not strong on the agenda. This would only be possible if bigger countries took into account the specificities of smaller ones, and when existing systems from bigger regional players are not imposed on smaller states.

Fourth, there is an obvious trend of strong regional or even international collaboration in the area of professional accreditation. In the Caribbean, there are currently two regional specialized accrediting bodies – the Caribbean Accreditation Authority for Education in Medicine and other Health Professions (CAAM-HP) and the Caribbean Accreditation Council for Engineering Technology (CACET). It is anticipated that another will soon be established for teacher education. CAAM-HP reported that discussions are underway with the World Federation for Medical Education (WFME) to create a mechanism through which medical accreditors (such as CAAM-HP) will become accredited by WFME. As a consequence, medical qualifications would be mutually recognized by all members. In the South Asian region, the Association of Management Development Institutions in South Asia (AMDISA) is running a regional accreditation scheme for the management of courses offered in the region.

Finally, several participants in the debate felt that it would be desirable to have the QA system aligned with both the NQF and a Regional Qualifications Framework (RQF). Students in small states, even more than those in bigger states, wish that their credentials could be portable and on par with similar programmes offered in bigger, industrialized countries. From this point of view, the need to link up with regional frameworks internationally becomes necessary at some point. In this respect, the transnational qualifications framework currently under construction by the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) appear as a promising initiative.

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