

External quality assurance of tertiary education in small states: What are the options?

Overview

Within the context of rapid globalization, small states are confronted with the challenge of providing access to a high-quality and diversified local provision of tertiary education. However, they face major constraints related to the availability of skilled human resources and difficulties in realizing economies of scale. In response to this challenge, private provision – including cross-border and distance learning operators – has been actively encouraged in many small states, with the expectation that such provision will complement the national programme offer. This, however, is creating new challenges concerning their regulation and quality assurance. This policy brief discusses available policy options that can respond to the regulatory and quality assurance challenges of tertiary education in small states.

The challenge of increasing quality access to tertiary education in small states

Among the major challenges for education authorities worldwide is the provision of equitable quality access to tertiary education. Unprecedented levels of social demand for quality education have arisen from the expansion of primary and secondary education, in part resulting from the Education for All (EFA) movement. In a growing number of countries, lower secondary education has become part of a compulsory basic education cycle, and thus the pressure on access to upper secondary education is mounting.

Small states are no exception to this pattern: indeed their educational coverage is more advanced than the average of developing countries. While the world average gross enrolment rate (GER) in secondary education was 66 per cent in 2006 (UNESCO Institute for Statistics [UIS], 2008: 91), the great majority of small states had GERs in secondary education above 70 per cent. In addition, many small countries in the Caribbean have established policies to universalize secondary education. In many small developing states, the social demand for tertiary education is thus increasing rapidly.

While small countries are struggling with the provision of access, they are also increasingly concerned with the quality of their tertiary education provision. Indeed, quality is at the forefront of issues relating to tertiary education in developing countries, including small countries. Since small developing states have particularly high rates of skilled migration, international compatibility of qualifications is a major concern of their tertiary education policies.



Context and problem analysis

‘Quality assurance systems have become a major reform avenue in tertiary education worldwide.’

In order to respond to the challenge of access, policy-makers in tertiary education have been encouraging private providers – including cross-border for-profit operators offering franchised education, e-learning, and education via off-shore campuses – to enter the domestic tertiary education sector. In small states, particularly, such provisions have been commonly embraced as a means of providing access to good-quality ‘foreign brand’ education.

However, the drawbacks and challenges have subsequently become apparent. The standards of cross-border providers have not always been on a par with national providers; and the contents of programmes have not always fitted the realities of the recipient countries.

A further concern relates to academic fraud, arising from increased internationalization of tertiary education. This is of particular concern in small countries – some of which have experienced problems when operators of ‘degree mills’ make

it appear that their degrees originate in these countries. National authorities in small states often lack the human resources and efficient tools and infrastructure for monitoring such developments. They are also faced with many instances of sub-standard providers – who often have been unable to obtain accreditation in their home states – opting to operate from their countries. In addition, the quality assurance of mixed mode or online programmes pose supplementary challenges.

And finally, students from small states are, on average, much more mobile than those from bigger countries. Small states thus need to be in a position to make informed decisions concerning the recognition of qualifications earned abroad. Yet, often they lack the information which would allow them to compare the level of foreign and local qualifications. They also find it difficult to produce reliable and publicly available information on the recognition status of their local tertiary education provision.

What are the particular challenges to quality assurance in small states?

All these challenges point to the desirability of creating a quality assurance system, which has become a major reform avenue in tertiary education worldwide. But small states face particular challenges which need to be overcome.

First, quality assurance is a highly specialized area that requires expertise and professional human capacity for the conception and organization of a scheme. Quality assurance systems commonly



Students doing group work in the library in a relaxed atmosphere.



Chemical Engineering Block at UWI, St. Augustine, Trinidad.

rely on external reviewers, and advanced academic capacity would be needed for the external review of tertiary institutions and their programmes. This competence, however, is often not available in a small state setting.

Second, small states find it difficult to assign independent external reviewers from the country, given the intimacy of small states in general and particularly within the same professional field, where individuals regularly interact with each other in a multitude of situations. This is why they often need to draw on outside experts, but this then becomes a major factor driving up costs.

Third, since many small states traditionally operate with a very limited number of tertiary institutions, they benefit from a long-established tradition of institutional autonomy, and sometimes a lack of collective concern for quality.

Fourth, given the fact that the tertiary education sector for small states is small, and economies of scale are difficult to realize, the challenge of a cost-effective support structure to quality assurance is major.

Key terms

External quality assurance (EQA): External assurance of quality in higher education is a process of establishing stakeholder confidence that provision (input, process, and outcomes) fulfils expectations or meets minimum requirements.

Accreditation: The establishment of the status, legitimacy, or appropriateness of an institution, programme, or module of study.

Audit: In the context of quality in higher education, is a process for checking that procedures are in place to assure quality, integrity or standards of provision and outcomes.

Review: A general term that embraces all methods used to judge the performance of an individual, group, or organization.

Licensing: The formal granting of permission to (a) operate a new institution, (b) offer a new programme of study, (c) practice a profession.

Recognition: The formal acknowledgement of the status of an organization, institution, or programme.

Source: INQAAHE Glossary, available at:
www.qualityresearchinternational.com/glossary/#assurance

Designing sustainable solutions for quality assurance systems

‘Many small states have recently adopted legislation for the creation of an external quality assurance system.’

While small countries have been somewhat slower than other countries in establishing external quality assurance (EQA) systems, they have recently been particularly eager to do so. Indeed, many small states have recently adopted legislation for the creation of an EQA system, but they have often found it difficult to design and implement a cost-effective and sustainable system.

Policy-makers in small states who wish to establish external quality assurance systems have several options when designing such a system. The basic principles of ‘good practice’ in quality assurance are the same whatever the size of the tertiary education sector; and there are international and regional guidelines or codes of good practice that can guide countries in implementing the principles (see Box 1). The particularities of each tertiary system, however, will shape the fundamental choices for an EQA system – such as with regard to the model to be adopted, the overall purpose of the system, the

unit of analysis, and the approach to international cooperation.

Quality assurance structure models: multi-purpose vs. multi-level

To build sustainable solutions for the EQA support structure, one model for a cost-effective EQA structure could be called ‘multi-purpose’. This groups several functions – such as managing the qualifications framework, organizing a quality assurance scheme, and guiding the recognition process of foreign credentials. It has thus become a noticeable trend in many small states that qualification frameworks and EQA mechanisms are established under one organization. This is the case in the Maldives, Namibia, Samoa, and Seychelles, where programme accreditation helps to implement and give sense to the NQF. The reason for this is that quality assurance, accreditation, registration, and recognition form a logical chain that requires similar or complementary competencies. Entrusting one organization with this set of tasks appears to be a good strategy to enhance the cost-effectiveness of these bodies and to create local synergies.

Another option for small states is the multi-level model, in which all activities related to quality assurance in the entire education sector are assembled under one body. Since ministries of education in small states are commonly in charge of the entire education sector, this model seems to have particular merits. It also has the advantage of increasing the potential for sector coordination through the determination of consistent quality

Box 1. Selected guidelines on good practice in quality assurance in higher education

IIEP training modules on ‘External quality assurance in higher education: options for higher education managers’. Available at: www.iiep.unesco.org/capacity-development/training/training-materials/external-quality-assurance.html

INQAAHE *Guidelines of Good Practice in Quality Assurance*, published by the International Network For Quality Assurance Agencies In Higher Education. Available at: www.inqaahe.org/main/capacity-building-39/guidelines-of-good-practice-51

Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, published by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) Available at: www.enqa.eu/pubs_esg.lasso

UNESCO/OECD *Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education*. Available at: www.unesco.org/education/guidelines_E.indd.pdf

criteria throughout the education sector.

Many EQA systems in small states focus only on private providers (such as licensing procedures, or in some cases accreditation schemes), but some have more comprehensive mechanisms that cover both public and private providers. Those that are more comprehensive tend to include a review of institutions and programmes (e.g. the Maldives) or quality audit (e.g. Mauritius, for public sector institutions).

The overall purpose of quality assurance: control and accountability vs. quality improvement

With regard to the main orientations embraced by EQA structures in small states, most newly created systems give priority to control and put in place registration/licensing schemes for private providers. However, many are also evolving towards the development of a quality assurance mechanism that applies to the whole tertiary education sector. In a few small states, a decision has been taken to keep the regulatory (registration, licensing, recognition) and the quality assurance (accreditation, quality audit, review) functions separate. But in a greater number of countries, both are located under the quality assurance structure, because the small size of the country and the available expertise do not allow them to be separated (see discussion of multi-purpose model above).

The unit of analysis: institution vs. programme

Some quality assurance systems take programmes as the unit for analysis (e.g. Jamaica, Mauritius, and Seychelles), whereas others

Box 2. The Samoa Qualifications Authority

Samoa is a small Pacific nation of some 180,000 inhabitants. Economic growth is heavily dependent on a few industries, especially tourism and fishing. Samoa's economy is dominated by subsistence village agriculture, which occupies two-thirds of the workforce. Remittances from the many Samoans working overseas are an important contribution to the economy. While geographically isolated, Samoa has strong human resources training and transfer links to larger economies that offer regional and international opportunities for Samoan citizens with recognized qualifications - in particular New Zealand, Australia, American Samoa, and the USA.

The Samoa Qualifications Authority was established to bring coherence and to ensure that post-school education and training in Samoa was focused on national development goals. A related goal was to ensure that all learning is of good quality and is valued, whether it takes place in formal training institutions, in the community or in the workplace, and whether higher academic or more practically oriented. The Samoan authorities recognize that, especially in a small nation, all elements are important for national economic, social, and cultural strength.

The following responsibilities are entrusted to the Authority through legislation established in 2006:

- a. registration of providers (licensing);
- b. accreditation of the institutions including staff and resources/facilities;
- c. accreditation of programmes;
- d. guidelines for the conduct of institutional self-evaluation;
- e. coordination and conduct of external quality audit;
- f. registration of provider qualifications onto the Qualifications Framework;
- g. developing and maintaining a qualifications register; and
- h. facilitating international equivalence of national qualifications.

Source: Submission to the 2007 IIEP Distance Education Course on EQA for Asia-Pacific countries.

focus on both institutions and programmes (Cyprus, only for the private sector). The focus on programme accreditation seems appropriate for three main reasons. First, the relatively small number of programmes to be accredited justifies placing the locus of accreditation at this level. Second, accreditation at the programme level is more effective in enhancing quality than institutional accreditation. And third, private providers may start new programmes, once

International collaboration: regional and multi-state vs. national solutions

they have obtained institutional accreditation, which are not quality assured. Hence a system for quality control at the programme level remains a persistent priority.

Regional or multi-state cooperation, such as exemplified by the University of the West Indies (UWI) and the University of the South Pacific (USP), is a fact of life in those regions with a majority of small states. In the area of quality assurance, regional collaboration of existing quality assurance bodies is well developed. In those regions where small states form the majority of

members, and where there exist regional universities, such as in the Pacific or Caribbean regions, the potential for regional collaboration in the area of quality assurance is of course very strong; but it is not always easy, because small states are also particularly sensitive about their sovereignty and independence.

But there are already some regional solutions to quality assurance under way or under discussion, such as:

- The creation of a regional accreditation body, such as the Caribbean Accreditation

Table 1 Selected structures for quality assurance in small states

	Multi-functional quality assurance structure	Multi-level quality assurance structure	Regional solutions
Tonga	Tonga National Qualifications and Accreditation Board		Pacific qualifications framework under construction
Maldives	Maldives Accreditation Board		
Barbados	Barbados Accreditation Council		UWI, CAAM-HP, CACET
Mauritius	Tertiary Education Council		Southern African qualifications framework
Seychelles	Seychelles Qualifications Authority		Southern African qualifications framework
Dominica	National Accreditation Board		UWI, CAAM-HP, CACET
Bahrain		Bahrain Accreditation Council	
Saint Lucia		TVET and Accreditation Unit	UWI, CAAM-HP, CACET
Botswana	Tertiary Education Council		Southern African qualifications framework
Trinidad & Tobago	Accreditation Council of Trinidad and Tobago		UWI, CAAM-HP, CACET
The Bahamas	National Accreditation and Equivalency of the Bahamas		UWI, CAAM-HP, CACET
Samoa	Samoa Qualifications Authority	Post-school and training sector	Pacific qualifications framework under construction
Belize	National Accreditation Council		UWI, CAAM-HP, CACET
Namibia	Namibia Qualifications Authority		Southern African qualifications framework

Source: Constructed from information provided the IIEP distance education courses on external quality assurance conducted in 2007, 2008, and 2009.

Authority for Education in Medicine and other Health Professions (CAAM-HP), see Box 3, and the Caribbean Accreditation Council for Engineering and Technology (CACET).

- The creation of a regional umbrella body in charge of overseeing and supporting national quality assurance agencies (e.g. an intergovernmental agreement was reached in 2009 to create the Caribbean Community Accreditation Agency for Education and Training).
- The creation of regional pools of external reviewers, on which national quality assurance bodies could draw as a solution to the limited number of local reviewers.
- The use of a neighbouring country's quality assurance body for certain quality assurance tasks, such as institutional audit, for which it would be difficult to develop local cost-effective solutions.
- Linking up with the QA units of the regional universities, such as UWI and USP. When designing a mechanism for external quality assurance, it is very important to assess or to build on existing capacity at the institutional level.

Indeed, higher education institutions located in small states may have a well-functioning internal quality assurance system on which the external mechanism should build – and even learn from. This is certainly the case of the bigger regional universities, such as UWI and USP. In such a context, the external mechanism may simply function as a validation mechanism for internal systems.

Box 3. Regional quality assurance under CARICOM

Under the aegis of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), the Caribbean Accreditation Authority for Education in Medicine and other Health Professions (CAAM-HP) was established in 2003. CAAM-HP was created as a regional accreditation body after the General Medical Council (GMC) of the United Kingdom advised it that it would no longer accredit medical schools outside the European Union. CAAM-HP accredits medical, dental, veterinary, and other health programmes leading to professional degrees required for practice in CARICOM Member States.

CARICOM has also made efforts to establish a broader accreditation agency in order to:

- establish an internationally recognized system of post-secondary and tertiary education for the Caribbean;
- promote the mobility of highly skilled individuals within the community;
- contribute to the economic and social development of the community; and
- ensure international recognition and agreements with state entities for reciprocal recognition.

CARICOM is also involved in the development of a framework for distance education. This is being facilitated by the Caribbean Knowledge Learning Network (CKLN), which has a CKLN Regional Institutional Strengthening Advisory Committee (CRISPAC). This Committee established a Quality Assurance Advisory Group in 2007, the membership of which includes the heads of the accrediting bodies as well as CARICOM and sector agencies such as the Caribbean Tourism Organization. CKLN has facilitated consultations which aim to develop a Framework for Quality Assurance in Tertiary Education in the Caribbean.

Sources: CARICOM Secretariat website (www.caricom.org); CAAM-HP website (www.caam-hp.org); information collected during the IIEP/COL online debate on External Quality Assurance in Tertiary Education, 8-19 June 2009.



Recently built auditorium at UWI St Augustine campus.

Conclusions

Small states arguably face an increasingly prominent tension of developing policy solutions that fit their particular needs and environments, while working with regional or other multi-state initiatives which comply with broader agendas of economic development. This Policy Brief has discussed and argued for certain options available to policy-makers for the design and operation of a quality assurance scheme for their tertiary education systems.

This Brief has shown that policy-makers are confronted with one major tension: how to create an EQA mechanism that corresponds to national needs, uses the potential of regional cooperation, and corresponds to international standards of quality assurance. While it is understandable that decisions for registration and accreditation are often taken at the national level, the capacity to conduct assessments upon which recommendations are made to national authorities could be established at the regional level. Regional cooperation in the area of qualifications frameworks and quality assurance has a high potential, as a means of both pooling scarce resources and serving an intra-regional mobility agenda. In addition, a national quality assurance scheme needs to comply with international good practice, as outlined in existing codes of good practice (e.g. see the INQAAHE code of good practice). It is particularly useful to envisage quality assurance in small states as a multi-level exercise in which institutional, national, and regional authorities all play their role.

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