

INQAAHE Project on Small States

Situational Analysis on Quality Assurance in Higher Education in Small States

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Small states is a term applied to a diverse group of sovereign countries — many with populations of 1.5 million or less, some very poor; some developing or belong to the group of the least developed countries; some islands or groups of islands; some land locked; some wealthy (www.worldbank.org). Most of the small states share the common challenges of remoteness and/or isolation, susceptibility to natural disasters and environmental changes, limited diversification in their economic activities, and limited capacity to respond to the challenges and opportunities of globalisation. Inadequate skilled human resource and limited financial resource are major problems for many developing small states. These common challenges require a different way of thinking about the strategies that would work well in the small states context including options for quality assurance (QA).

Although the challenges of small states have received increasing attention in recent years, in many international discussions small states still find that their special needs are pushed to the periphery by the competing demands of bigger, richer, and often more powerful countries. International and intergovernmental organisations such as the UNESCO, Commonwealth of Learning (COL) and World Bank have recognised the special attention the small states require and have been working on capacity development in areas that will improve the conditions of people of small states. Building on the work of the initiatives of these partners, the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) wanted to explore different models of quality assurance, including those which promote the building of quality assurance capacities of higher education institutions (HEIs). To achieve this, INQAAHE established a project.

The project was steered by a Task Force convened by Dr Antony Stella of the Australian Universities Quality Agency. The membership of the Task Force was diverse and it brought together valuable expertise from the backgrounds of small states, quality assurance, and partners who have been working on issues of small states regionally and internationally. The project received some funding from the Global Initiative for Quality Assurance Capacity-Building (GIQAC).

Considering the lack of information on quality assurance developments in small states, the Task Force identified the survey method as the way forward to carry out a situational analysis. The survey was administered in 45 small states (population of less than 1.5 million as the criterion, including the developed countries) and four other states (Botswana, Jamaica, Lesotho, Namibia) that are usually invited to the Small States Forum by the World Bank due to the common challenges they face. UNESCO includes Rwanda and Bosnia in its small states discussions and the case studies of these two countries were also included in the situational analysis. In all, the target group had 51 countries and three regional universities. The response rate was 56%. Wherever

possible, inputs obtained from the online forum on QA for small states conducted by the International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) (2009) and the case studies commissioned by UNESCO (2007) were incorporated.

The Situational Analysis

The situational analysis revealed that the quality assurance landscape in small states is marked by the following features and trends (from general to more specific trends that have an impact on QA):

- Regional developments that require alignment with regional guidelines
- Successful multi-state collaborations in increasing access to higher education
- National drive towards self sufficiency that at times comes in conflict with collaborative efforts
- Ongoing policy reforms that recognise the need for quality education
- Strong role of the governments in establishing, funding and monitoring quality assurance structures
- Existing national QA systems that can provide leadership in collaborative QA strategies
- New quality assurance units doing multiple roles and serving multiple purposes
- Inadequate resources (human and finance) to support the full implementation of quality assurance systems
- Quality assurance applicable to both public and private institutions with varying levels of emphasis and more monitoring of private institutions in general
- New challenges presented by low quality cross border education providers and profit motive private providers including the distance education providers
- Encouragement to use new technologies for distance learning and new forms of education but widening policy gaps and consequent challenges in monitoring new forms of education

The analysis highlighted a number of challenges to the full implementation of the quality assurance mechanisms and the top four are:

1. Lack of breadth of experience in the system
2. Lack of 'spare' capacity in the higher education system to implement quality assurance
3. Scarcity of financial resources devoted to quality assurance arrangements within the higher education budget
4. Small size of the system and the consequent lack of objectivity (everyone knowing everyone else)

QA Options

With this information, this report made an attempt to identify various QA options for small states. Although the options are many, how well a particular QA option will be able to fulfill the expectations of the individual small states and what the underpinning principles are need a lot of reflection. In particular, these options involve varying levels of collaboration and their success depends on a number of factors. Some of them are:

- o Small states have initiated a number of collaborative efforts to increase access to higher education. That approach can be extended to QA as well. However, the governments need to take a stand on the balance they wish to achieve between 'national agenda' and 'multi-state effort'. Transparency in the political stand,

clarity in prioritisation of what the state wishes to achieve at least in mid-term, and the will to find resources to support the strategy are important.

- Acknowledging the leadership that comes from the higher education institutions (HEIs), strengthening their role explicitly in the external QA processes will help in managing the overall QA processes of the country in a more coordinated way. In states where there is institutional capacity there is potential for a light touch to external quality assurance.
- Small states need to be more sensitive to some issues such as new forms of education and qualifications obtained from foreign providers. It is important that the QA strategy of the small states includes them within its scope right from the beginning.
- While it is important to recognise the special needs of the small states, it is equally important to ensure that small states join the main stream QA developments and fall in line with certain international expectations.
- The real prerequisite for sustaining the QA development in small states lies in the skills and attitudes of people who are to lead the QA initiatives. Therefore, adequate human resource development is an imperative for small states.
- Using the benefits of technology, small states are exploring new forms of education to increase access to higher education. That approach can be extended to new forms of quality assurance. Small states can explore creating review panels that can provide ongoing mentorship to institutions. These mentors can be in any part of the world and the online interaction saves travel costs.

With this background, this report has made an attempt to highlight some possibilities. Groups of small states may like to experiment with a few options. Of the various options one model that evolves as a desirable model is the regional approach.

Options at the National Level

One entity with multiple QA roles within a country: This is suitable for small states that have buffer bodies other than the ministries (Mauritius, Botswana). While the regulatory decisions may still be with the ministry, the buffer bodies have a lot of steering responsibilities and external quality assurance sits very well within those responsibilities. This option ensures independence and autonomy of external QA but has resource implications. It is suitable for states that already have some core capacity for QA.

Qualifications Framework and Quality Assurance: This option requires a single entity to take up two roles. Decisions on qualifications and their quality are vital in most small states that experience significant academic and professional mobility. Although the emphases of the QFs are different from the major purposes of typical quality assurance agencies, the commonalities allow for establishing synergy between QA approaches and the QFs. This option will work well for the countries that have started making some progress in establishing the qualifications framework authorities or the QA bodies (Tonga, Timor-Leste, Seychelles, Swaziland, Fiji, Samoa). Resource implications are

there but in a more limited way since this requires managing only two (although very substantial) roles.

Building on institutional internal QA: In a country where the higher education institutions are able to manage their academic affairs well, the institutional QA structures should be given the responsibility to monitor program level quality and the external QA can gradually move towards a ‘light touch’ approach and do with less financial implications. Some of the HEIs have the capacity to provide academic oversight for smaller HEIs. This option will free the time and resources for external QA to focus on areas that cannot be covered by the HEIs (eg non-higher education technical and vocational education). This model will suit the countries served by the regional universities such as the University of the West Indies (UWI) and the University of the South Pacific (USP).

Options at the Multi-State Level

Single QA Framework: A group of small states, not necessarily within a regional grouping, can join together to form a single QA entity and agree to adhere to a single common framework. This is advantageous to small states that have strong commonalities, especially in the higher education context, and it allows them to pool their resources together. This is particularly applicable to subgroups of the South Pacific island countries and the Caribbean countries. The disadvantage is the resistance that countries might show, especially if they are at the two extremes of the development continuum in higher education in spite of other similarities.

One entity with multiple QA frameworks: Resistance to a single framework can be addressed by establishing multiple frameworks but under the same QA entity. Depending on the national priorities and challenges, a country can choose the framework that is the best fit. There are QA bodies in bigger systems that already have two or more different frameworks for the institutions to choose from, depending on what the institutions wish to demonstrate – essential standards or standards of excellence. Such an approach can be extended to a group of small countries that wish to work collaboratively. This approach helps to pool resources.

Single Framework with flexibility: One entity with a single QA framework that is amenable to flexible interpretations and implementation is the emphasis here. Quality audit is an example, where the overall framework of QA could be the same, but the implementation can address the variations in national contexts without compromising on the basic good principles of QA. The disadvantage is the risk of this entity becoming a super regulator for the countries that choose this option. The governance of this body has to be planned with adequate checks and balances to ensure ‘collective governance’. Managing the complexities of such an operation will be a huge challenge but can be managed collectively.

Forming alliances: A small state can form an alliance with another state that already has a suitable QA strategy, and agree to align its procedures to that QA Framework. For countries that are in the close proximity of large established systems that are not necessarily small states (eg Bhutan and India) this option is suitable. However, ensuring that the small state gets what it wants in that QA service is a challenge here. Care should be taken to make sure that this option does not result in total outsourcing of QA

services to the bigger system. Local capacity to support the national higher education system in its quality improvement measures should be ensured.

Options at the Regional Level

A regional framework to be implemented variously: This option does not envisage the establishment of a regional body but emphasises agreement on regional policies, procedures and principles. Similar to the Bologna process and the Brisbane Communiqué process this would require that the small states of the region collectively agree to a QA framework and adjust their policies and procedures according to that framework. The way the small states of Europe are aligning to the European Standards and Guidelines is an example. Regional forums or mediators are necessary to ensure agreement on the collaborative framework and they already exist. East Africa is an example.

A regional body overseeing and supporting the national QA mechanisms: This requires the establishment of a regional QA body. Depending on the state of development of QA in a particular state the regional body can offer customised QA service. This option has the potential to establish a regional QA framework. This is already emerging as an option in Caribbean, Central America, and in the European region.

Although the options are many, the regional approach stands out as the desirable model and INQAAHE has a role in promoting that model.

Role of INQAAHE

As a network of quality assurance agencies, INQAAHE has the expertise and experience in facilitating a dialogue on the QA options and help with the training and capacity development required for implementing the QA options. Given that this project was commissioned by INQAAHE, the Task Force was mindful of identifying action points for INQAAHE to support the small states in their QA developments. A number of areas and action points were identified and in particular, INQAAHE can promote the QA discussions in small states in the following ways:

1. Many good QA practices have come from the HEIs and the academics and administrators from the HEIs play a significant role in organising the external QA structures in small HE systems. However, the tension between internal QA and external QA is well known and there are concerns that a greater role for institutional internal QA will result in subjectivity and complacency in steering higher education developments. INQAAHE can play a role in strengthening the discussions on these ‘tensions and synergies’ and better ways of integrating internal and external QA in small states.
2. There is general agreement that improving institutional capacity for self-monitoring of quality is one of the major purposes of external QA. However, the national context in many small states requires the QA bodies to focus more on quality control and, consequently, building institutional capacity for continuous improvement does not receive adequate attention. Helping QA bodies to discharge their quality enhancement role itself is an area that needs capacity building. INQAAHE can develop guidelines for institutional QA frameworks to strengthen self-monitoring of quality with particular attention to ensuring objectivity and professionalism of those operations. External QA bodies can be helped to support the HEIs in implementing those institutional developments.

3. Resource materials useful in the small states context need attention. INQAAHE can facilitate the development of publications relevant to small states such as case studies, guidelines, training materials and exemplars.
4. Professional development of QA personnel is a priority for small states. INQAAHE can organise internships, exchange programs and study visits for QA staff of small states.
5. Collaboration in strengthening QA expertise at the regional level is key to sustaining the QA developments in small states. Developing regional pools of QA experts, involving regional QA experts in QA activities, organising training programs on QA at the regional level are some of the efforts that need consideration and INQAAHE's involvement in these initiatives will be helpful. These initiatives are already underway.
6. Core to all the QA options is the question 'what are the core principles of QA?' INQAAHE should take a leading role in promoting discussions on its Guidelines for Good Practice (GGP) in QA with specific reference to small states.
7. An interest group or a sub network of small states has the potential to provide the platform for sharing of good practices. Members of the interest group can identify exemplars from their own countries related to the GGPs and share them through INQAAHE online forum and other INQAAHE events.
8. INQAAHE can facilitate regional discussions among policy makers, QA professionals and academics of small states on implementing and supporting good practices in QA.
9. The tension between 'national self sufficiency' and 'regional cooperation' has started manifesting in many forms; proliferation of QA structures is an outcome of that tension. As a network of QA agencies, INQAAHE should be able to argue for the supremacy of 'the capacity to adhere to QA principles and frameworks' (software) over the 'QA physical infrastructure' (hardware). It should take efforts to convince small states of collective QA options that need not be perceived as threats to national agenda. A concept document on the governance of an ideal regional QA framework and infrastructure that balances these two extremes is worth considering.
10. International donor funding and support from the intergovernmental bodies have shaped the policies and practices of small states in significant ways. As a QA network INQAAHE should be able to advise the donor community and the intergovernmental bodies of the 'best fit' QA option and shape the move towards a more sustainable QA model. This is an advocacy role for INQAAHE.

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The INQAAHE Task Force on Small States

1. Antony Stella, Audit Director, Australian Universities Quality Agency, Australia (Convener)
2. Norman Sharp, Former Director of Quality Assurance Agency, Scotland, UK (INQAAHE Board member and INQAAHE Board Liaison for most part of the project)
3. Dhurata Bozo, INQAAHE Board Member from Albania when the Task Force was established (Member)
4. Tariq Al-Sindi, Quality Review Director, Education Reform, Bahrain (Member)
5. Ibrahim Hassan, Executive Director, Maldives Accreditation Board, Ministry of Higher Education, Employment and Social Security, Republic of Maldives (Member)
6. Morella Joseph, Programme Manager - Human Resource Development, CARICOM Secretariat, Guyana (Member)
7. Ethley London, CEO, University Council of Jamaica (Member)
8. Sinapi Moli, CEO, Samoa Qualifications Authority, Samoa (Member)
9. Paul West, Director, Knowledge Management and Information Technology, Commonwealth of Learning (Member)
10. Akemi Yonemura, Program Specialist, Section for Reform, Innovation and Quality Assurance, Division of Higher Education, UNESCO, Paris (Member)

Small States that have contributed to this report (INQAAHE Survey, IIEP Forum, call for interviews): Bahrain, Barbados, Belize, Bhutan, Bosnia, Botswana, Brunei, Cyprus, Dominica, Fiji, Gambia, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, Maldives, Mauritius, Namibia, Rwanda, Samoa, Seychelles, Solomon Islands, St. Lucia, St. Vincent & the Grenadines, Swaziland, The Bahamas, Timor-Leste, Tonga, Trinidad & Tobago

The regional universities that have contributed to this report: The University of the South Pacific, The University of the West Indies

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