

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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A Comparative Study of External Quality Assurance Systems in the Caribbean Region

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Research Domain: International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract:

Based on the aspiration for harmonisation of external Quality Assurance (QA) systems in the Caribbean region and the observation that these systems differ due to their historical ties, this study sought to understand the similarities and differences between three English-speaking countries (Barbados, Jamaica, and Trinidad & Tobago) and two Dutch-speaking countries (Curaçao and Suriname). The study focuses both on the external QA frameworks, i.e., which aspects are included and how criteria/standards are operationalised, and QA processes, including the purpose and legitimisation and its design. Each country is initially studied independently as a case study based on document analysis; after which comparisons are made. Results suggest a distinction between the external QA systems in the Dutch- and English-speaking countries in which the former is more strongly focused on what constitutes good teaching and learning while the latter is more focused on ensuring all internal QA processes are in place to answer that same question.

Paper:

Introduction

While higher education systems in the Caribbean region have some key characteristics in common, such as being based in small (island) states with limited educational opportunities, low output and the risk of brain drain as a result of globalisation (Brown & Shen, 2017), their connections to other higher education systems and institutions vary based on historical ties. This study sought out to understand the similarities and differences between the external Quality Assurance (QA) systems for three English-speaking countries (Barbados, Jamaica, and Trinidad & Tobago) and two Dutch-speaking countries (Curaçao and Suriname). Compared to other English- and Dutch-speaking countries in the region, these countries comprise larger numbers of higher education students and have more advanced external QA systems.

This comparative study answers the call by Ali and colleagues (2018) to broaden the scope of comparative studies to develop a better understanding of fundamental differences which may

impede regional and international collaboration. It more specifically contributes to the effort to harmonise the QA systems in the Caribbean region by revealing the main similarities and highlighting the principal differences between the current systems. It will help External Quality Assurance Agencies (EQAAs) to understand their position in comparison to others. Moreover, minimal requirements could potentially be deduced from this study that could be used as part of registration requirements for EQAAs.

The study is guided by the following research question: What are the main similarities and differences between the external Quality Assurance systems in English- and Dutch-speaking countries, in terms of QA frameworks and processes, within the Caribbean region? For this study, the QA system is divided in two main components: the QA framework and the QA processes.

Methodology

The QA frameworks of the EQAAs of the five case studies are analysed and compared by studying the following six categories of criteria and subsequently the associated standards by which quality is evaluated: governance and administration, mission and purpose, programme content and outcomes, teaching and learning, commitment to continuous improvement, and availability of resources. In doing so, the study considers that some of the EQAAs offer institutional or programme accreditation, while others offer both. In addition, special attention is paid to aspects that are only incorporated in one or two of the frameworks to ensure that minor differences do not go unnoticed.

To study the QA processes, for each country relevant policy documents pertaining to the original and subsequent development of the QA framework are gathered and analysed. The 'elements of external quality assurance in Higher Education framework' developed by Isabella (2014) guides the analysis. It focuses on the following four main topics; purpose and legitimate reason, design, site visit, and review report; each divided in multiple elements (see Figure 1).

Preliminary results and discussion

Commitment to continuous improvement is one of the shared criteria within the QA frameworks. One of the differences found concerns the level of detail of the criteria or standards, for instance, intra-group analysis of programme level accreditation frameworks reveal that Suriname's QA framework is far more detailed than Curaçao's framework. In addition, inter-group analysis reveals that the QA frameworks from the English-speaking countries more strongly focus on internal QA processes compared to the frameworks from the Dutch-speaking countries in which educational concepts, such as 'constructive alignment' (Biggs, 2003), can be recognised as central concept.

Regarding the comparison of the QA processes, several similarities can be identified. For instance, as universally acknowledged, the main steps during an external QA process are the self-evaluation process completed by the HEI under review, followed by the peer review process, resulting in a peer review report to be approved by the EQAA (INQAAHE, 2007). In all QA systems, the decision can be appealed. Nuanced differences are found regarding participation being voluntary or compulsory. A striking difference is the openness of the results: only NVAO reports (Curaçao) are fully public, the

other QA systems only publicise the outcome.

The results of this study are expected to contribute to the wider debate on what quality means in the context of QA and the role of the external QA processes and frameworks in turning the gaze either towards the QA processes or the outcomes of these processes. It also shows differences in development of the various systems within the Caribbean region in which the older systems moved from programme accreditation to institutional accreditation and discusses its implications, including prospects and hinderances for the harmonisation effort.

Topic	Main elements	Characteristics
Purpose and legitimate reason	Constitutional basis	Variation in the constitutions (legislation, rules and requirements) and authorities given to the involved external quality agency.
	Rationale	Differentiated purpose, e.g. accountability, competition, accreditation, (legal) compliance with performance indicators, recruiting of funding resources, improving teaching and learning, steering the national higher education systems in terms of resources and planning.
	Driving force	Internally and/or externally driven.
	Participation	Voluntary or compulsory participation.
Design	Aggregation level	Teaching, research or both.
	Agency	National or international quality agencies.
	Focus	Institution, discipline or program.
	Review panel	National and/or international members of external quality review agencies.
Site visit	Participants	Various stakeholders to be included during the site visit, e.g. management, academic and non-academic staff, students, graduates, representatives of the work field.
	Documents analysis	Wide range of documents need to be available for the review panel. Type of documents depends on whether the aim is to show compliance with performance indicators or merely proving that quality is provided.
	Activities	Meetings with various stakeholders (see list of participants), direct observation of teaching and/or guided tour.
Review Report	Openness of results	Confidential or public report.
	Focus of results	Encouraging development (formative: emphasizing recommendations for improvement) or judgment (summative: pass or fail) or graded judgment.
	(Inter)national focus	Results directed to ranking or not.

References:

Figure 1. QA process analysis framework (Isabella, 2014)

References

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