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[Waheed, Abdul & Pillay, Hitendra](#)
(2012)

A higher education quality assurance model for small states: The Maldives case study.

IAMURE International Journal of Education, 2(1), pp. 266-285.

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A Higher Education Quality Assurance Model for Small States: The Maldives Case Study

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Abstract

This paper presents findings of a case study in the Maldives of a holistic quality assurance model for higher education in Small States. It is a case study in the Maldives, an example of a Small State and is a useful reference for policy makers, practitioners and professionals in other Small States. The study draws on a systems theory to investigate the systemic characteristics of quality assurance in higher education. It is a qualitative case study and includes the use of document analysis and interviews data. The preliminary findings indicate that regulatory mechanisms, independence, one-tier system, guidelines and standards, transparency, academic audit, accreditation and collaboration emerged as critical areas for the system of quality assurance in higher education for Small States. Some of the mechanisms used by bigger nations to address the above critical areas may not be appropriate for Small States, adding weight to the 'fit for purpose' definition of quality.

Keywords: Higher education accreditation, Higher education quality indicators, Standards of higher education, higher education quality regulations, Programme accreditation, institutional accreditation, institutional audit.

INTRODUCTION

“Small States” are defined as countries with a population of 1.5 million or less (Stella, 2010; World Bank & Commonwealth Secretariat, 2000). According to current population figures, there are 49 independent states with populations of 1.5 million or less (Commonwealth Consultative Group, 1997). In those Small States that have some form of higher education (HE) there is either no quality assurance (QA) system or they seem to have adopted models from developed countries. This raises concerns about the ‘fit’ of those quality assurance regulations and procedures to the local, social and economic environments of the Small States. As a consequence, this research analysed what constitutes a QA system for the Small States and explored key elements and the relationships between the elements with a view to proposing a general model for a higher education QA systems for Small States. The Maldives, which is one of two Small States in South Asia (United Nations, 1994) was used as the context for the study.

Defining quality is a profound interest for many authors working in the HE quality assurance area and they differ in the way they describe it. Harvey and Green (1993) have written one of the most cited articles on quality in higher education under the title ‘defining quality’ (Van Kemenade, Pupius & Hardjono, 2008). The five interrelated definitions of quality identified by Harvey and Green are: (1) quality as exceptional, (2) quality as perfection or consistency, (3) quality as transformation, (4) quality as value for money, and (5) quality as fitness for purpose. These elements that define quality attracted quite a number of citations by researchers as Stephenson (2004) described it as “the most commonly used definitions”. This research considers quality as ‘fitness for purpose’, as this notion has particular relevance to higher education quality, especially when higher education institutions try to meet their local needs and contribute to the local development instead of trying to compete against international institutions.

The main research problem investigated by this study is the gap in conceptual and operational rigour to support a sustainable QA system for Small States. The research problem in this study is situated within a broader national and international system of QA in higher education to understand the implications for Small States. It is often seen that Small States adopt compromised versions of models of some developed nations, ending up with band-aid solutions (Houston & Maniku, 2005), which does not sufficiently provide the sustainability to support national needs and aspirations.

This research is significant as it proposes a QA model for Higher Education for small states. It will also serve as a useful reference of QA in Higher Education for policy makers, practitioners and professionals alike. A further benefit of this research is its systems approach rather than focusing simply on one or a few aspects of QA in Higher Education. This research acknowledges the changing nature of the Higher Education landscape and hence the need for QA to address ensuring quality and “fit for purpose”.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study seeks an in-depth understanding into QA in higher education and the reoccurring themes. It investigates what constitutes key attributes related to the main elements of QA in higher education through a case study approach in a Small State context, the context being the Maldives. The knowledge produced from the study was analysed with a

comparative perspective against global principles, concepts, and models in QA in higher education. Investigation of appropriateness and applicability of those that apply to Small States context is important for this study.

FRAMEWORK

This study is guided by a conceptual framework which is situated within a “systems theory” approach. One of the well-known basic assumptions regarding general systems theory is that a system has some common characteristics (Skyttner, 2001). In fact, structural and process elements, and relationships in QA systems have been found to be consistent characteristics in many countries such as Australia, New Zealand, the USA (Houston & Maniku, 2005). Houston and Maniku argue that this approach can help research and analyse the complex nature of QA in higher education with its multiple variables and relationships. Figure 1 illustrates the system theory, where elements and relationships between those elements are important for understanding systemic characteristics.

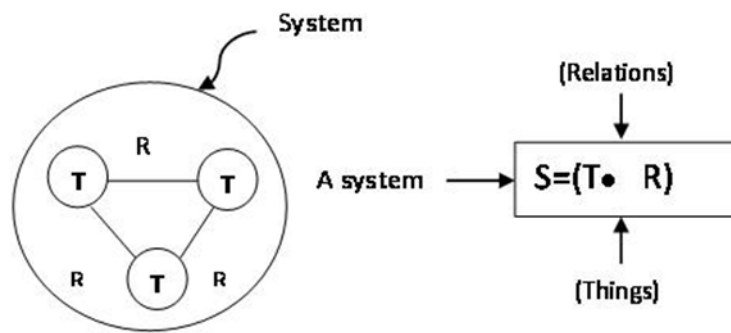


Figure 1: A General formula of Systems Theory (adopted from Klir (Klir, 1991))

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study adopts a qualitative approach and more specially a case study methodology. Yin (2003) argues that in order to develop preliminary concepts at the outset, it is important to rely on some theoretical concepts that will guide the design and data collection for case studies. In this study, the systems theory and a conceptual QA models provide such a basis. However, given the limited theorising of QA concepts and processes, employing a qualitative design, allowed the researcher to gain in-depth understanding of Higher Education QA and what it means from the perspective of those who are involved in the process. Through a qualitative case study approach, this study focused on understanding the processes of QA mechanisms in higher education in the context of Small States, in particular the Maldives.

The main research question is “*what constitutes key elements and mechanisms of an effective QA system in higher education for Small States?*” The question leads to exploration of a holistic model for a QA systems in higher education suitable to Small States.

This Maldives case study is characterised by its generalisability to other Small Sates because most of the Small States share most of the characteristics. Thus, the Maldives case study explored possible linkages, similarities, challenges, issues and QA options that emerge and are relevant to other Small State contexts. On the other hand, whilst a single case study approach is adopted the descriptive nature of case studies can present a complete description of the context (Yin, 2003) of Small States by the Maldives case study.

Within this case study approach, data was collected from two different sources, using two different data collection procedures. The first source was from government documents which were subjected to content analysis. This involved reviewing government documents related to QA in HE such as, the legislations, the institutional and organizational systems. This helped probe deep into current government policies and procedures and at the same time provided a basis for developing some of interview questions. The second source of the data was through interviews with key stakeholders. The interviewees were selected from four main stakeholder groups of higher education quality assurance in the Maldives: Ministry of Education (MoE), the Maldives Qualifications Authority (MQA), leading higher education institutions (HEIs) and the industry associations. Interview data was analysed using NVivo software.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The three key elements that were noted in the conceptual framework, under which the themes are discussed in this section are, regulatory framework, standards and service delivery. The preliminary findings indicate that regulatory mechanisms of the national quality assurance system, the management structure of the national quality assurance agency, the degree of independence of the national quality assurance body, transparency of the processes, external quality assurance/academic audit and collaboration with stakeholders, emerged as critical areas for the system of quality assurance in higher education. These are elaborated and discussed below.

Regulatory Mechanisms

Legislative and regulatory matters regarding the Maldives quality assurance system for the higher education sector is still not yet fully developed. The Maldives Accreditation Board (MAB) was created in 2001. As a positive step forward – in terms of strengthening the organisational authority – MAB was replaced by MQA in 2010. Though creating MQA is seen as a positive step to strengthen higher education quality assurance in Maldives, some pointed out the shortcomings of the legislative arrangement in place. The fact that both the MAB and the MQA were created by a presidential decree and not by a legal act is perceived by many stakeholders as not a proper regulatory set up.

Though the importance of having a national legislation for higher education in general and quality assurance in particular is understood, the MoE participant acknowledges that there is no such provision in the current national policy except a clause in the national strategic plan that discusses the creation of MQA. The mandate of MQA, given through the presidential decree, is regarded as the policy direction. In general, MQA is mandated to carry out the task of higher education quality assurance and disseminate information about quality of higher education providers and programs in the region and overseas.

All the participants agree that having an integrated and comprehensive national body for Higher Education QA is better for a Small State like Maldives than having fragmented agencies, because duplicating roles and functions creates confusions and unnecessary delays in decision making. Having one body can help to better control and set national standards and also monitor and enforce the policy. It can also give a clearer direction in following the system if it is one body. Participants agree that in a country like Maldives where higher education is still in the early growth phase, where there is a lack of expertise or capacity in

the HEIs and where there is lack of general human resources, there is a need for a strong agency that can guide and support the HE QA in its growth and development. It is also realised that due to lack of financial resources, it is not viable to set up too many institutional mechanisms in a Small State like Maldives. Therefore, a single strong agency is necessary to avoid the tension arising from such duplication of function.

Management Structure

The creation of MQA resulted in some changes in the management structure. MoE participant points out that the mandate of the board has been changed from that of advisory to regulatory. However, it is not clear how much regulatory power can be employed without legislation. In addition to that, private HEIs have representation on the board, making it inclusive and transparent. Another notable change expressed by the participants was the appointment of a CEO, who is a political appointee at deputy minister level, giving more authority and prestige. These changes reflect the intention of the government for strengthening the regulatory aspects of quality of higher education providers in the Maldives. However, while this is welcome, some participants argue that the change has been for the worse in terms of the continued long-existing capacity issue and even greater political influence than previously.

Independence of the Quality Assurance Body

Independence as conceived by the majority of the stakeholders is being devoid of political or any other preferential influence. Given the history of political interference and of stronger HEI's, there is consensus among all stakeholders that governance of the MAQ needs to be reviewed and if an act of law for QA in higher education is adopted it will provide a legitimate legal process of appeals and challenging decisions of MQA. In the absence of such provision, the stakeholders feel that MQA is subjected to unethical influences. Almost all participants believe that functional independence of a quality assurance body (MQA in the case of Maldives) is crucial for good practice.

Though creating MQA is seen as a positive development, many participants think that currently MQA decisions are not as independent as they should be. They think that there is too much political influence on MQA board decisions asserted by the Ministry and also by the President's Office. However, this is not how the MQA participant sees it. He thinks that there is no such political influence and since MQA is not a political entity, he thinks that total independence is not needed. Nonetheless, the fact that there is no legislation that stipulates the roles and functions of the stakeholders and board members and other related aspects of MQA, is an indication that the degree of independence is not clear.

Transparency and Guidelines

There is a consensus among the participants that the lack of guidelines and necessary documents about the processes of the quality assurance system means lack of transparency. All participants agree that there should be clear guidelines and documents outlining the quality assurance processes readily available to all stakeholders and the public. This is particularly true for major QA processes like internal and external audit processes. MQA participant claims that all such guidelines and instruments are available on the MQA website. A review of the MQA's website suggests that there are few guidelines available and most of the documents available on the website are various application forms required to be used when applying for MQA services such as certificate validation, course approval, etc. Though

there is talk of introducing academic audit, no guideline or manual is available on the website.

Another issue highlighted by Participants regarding guidelines is the process of developing such documents. They criticise the current process of developing such documents. A more collaborative process of involving the HEIs in developing the guidelines is desired by participants. Another point to bear in mind is, not to re-invent the wheel, which means to follow international guidelines, but keeping in mind the local context as well.

External Quality Assurance and Accreditation

Participants emphasise that the current process of supervising each and every batch of academic programmes at HEIs is time consuming and therefore, there is a need to start an academic auditing process. An institutional audit is referred to as an institutional review, a peer review, an external review (Vlăsceanu, Grünberg & Pârlea, 2007), external evaluation (Kohler, 2003), “external audit” (Strydom & Strydom, 2004), or an external quality assurance (Stella, 2004). This idea is echoed by many participants. Participants are giving a lot of thought to how the audit process should be introduced and continued. The important point that needs to be highlighted is that everyone is adamant that academic audit is vital for quality improvement of higher education.

Areas that need consideration are, audit manuals/guidelines, selection of expert panel for external evaluation, publishing the audit report and making it public, minimising conflicts of interest amongst the experts panel, and efficient secretarial support for the audit process.

The current process of approval of academic programmes is not regarded by MQA as accreditation as there are no periodic reviews or continuing process of assessment of programmes and institutions after initial licensing. This differs to Vlăsceanu, Grünberg and Pârlea’s (2007) definition of accreditation which is a process that usually results in awarding a status (yes/no decision), recognition, or a licence to operate an institution or a license to deliver a certain programme within a valid period of time. However, because there is an initial licensing, to some extent, this process is reminiscent to programme accreditation. The biggest complaint about this process of programme approval is its incompleteness when compared to above definition of accreditation and slow speed that may take months to give approval for one programme. Referring to this slow speed, some participants describe it as a “bottleneck” and there is a lack of resources – mostly human – to carry out the work properly.

Collaboration with Stakeholders

Collaboration between the quality assurance authority and the HEIs emerged as a major theme. Clear guidelines for regular collaborative meetings are important in order to “grow together” “develop together” and also increase transparency. In addition to that, collaboration across borders is also useful. The major challenge to this is Maldives is not in a regional grouping such as the South Pacific or the Caribbean. However, to some extent, internet connectivity and better communication could help to overcome that. One suggestion is that with collaboration, MQA can minimise the current constraint of sufficient qualified personnel at MQA.

The discussion of the results and findings of this study is guided by the conceptual framework and the major themes that emerged from the empirical study. According to the conceptual framework, which is based on the systems theory, a higher education quality

assurance system can be organised into three major elements. They are regulatory framework, standards and service delivery.

Regulatory Framework

Developing a proper regulatory system for quality assurance is becoming a norm in today's quality regime. This is vital for the systemic characteristics of QA in higher education to support enforcement of the agreed standards. The recent Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education commissioned by the Commonwealth of Australia emphasised the importance of strengthening Australian higher education general regulatory, accreditation and quality assurance systems (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008). In response, Australian government went on to set up the new Australian regulatory body Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) in 2010 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009).

The regulatory aspect of the Maldives quality assurance system is consistent with some of the findings of the INQAAHE study 'INQAAHE Project on Small States: Situational Analysis on Quality assurance in Small States' (Stella, 2010). The most common issue between this study and the INQAAHE study is the slow progression of the development of the quality assurance system. Though there are concerns about the regulatory set up, no concrete work has been done except establishing agencies and using presidential decrees, which has no real authority or enforcement ability. This is largely due to the absence of legislative arrangement and the lack of suitable regulatory set-up to the specific context.

According to the Maldives case study, issues such as absence of a legislative framework, lack of a clear national policy, government interference in the board decisions and lack of sufficient funding are biggest hurdles for establishing a fully-functioning higher education quality assurance system. Often the problem arises when the governments of Small States try to set up complex systems that are not viable to Small States. There is a growing body of critiques to current systems of quality assurance that are complex, inconsistent, fragmented and inefficient (Bradley et al., 2008; ENQA, 2006). Such systems normally have overlapping frameworks to regulate the quality and accreditation of different higher education provisions, including higher education institutions, vocational education and training and thus become over burdening.

King (2007) notes that in order to promote greater consistency and efficiency, and as a response to growing pressure on higher education quality assurance regulatory systems worldwide, a single one-tier system may be the way forward. This notion of one single strong agency or one-tier system for higher education quality assurance is supported by the participants of this study. Such a system is more suited to Small States, because it saves both human and physical resources; areas in which Small States are known to struggle (Stella, 2010). A review of the Portuguese quality assurance systems carried out by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) identified key characteristics of such a strong national QA body (ENQA, 2006). To be a one-tier system as well as to be independent of government and higher education institutions are two characteristics highlighted in the ENQA review. Other features recommended in the ENQA review are: that the agency should be responsible for accreditation and audit process; there should be a small independent government appointed board with members appointed in their personal capacity; the board should be vested with the authority to make accreditation decisions; the membership of the board should reflect established professionalism in overseeing quality assurance processes; and the board should be supplemented by an advisory council with representatives of relevant stakeholders, to ensure a wider involvement of relevant

stakeholders in quality assurance. The separation of quality assurance agencies from the government functions and the HE institution is central to ensure transparency and mitigate against any risk of conflict of interest. By and large, the participants of this study supported such a system except the advisory council mentioned in the ENQA review.

Standards

Sadler (1987) defines an academic standard as “a definite level of excellence or attainment or the recognised measure of what is adequate for some purpose, established by authority, custom or consensus” (p. 194). In light of Sadler’s definition of standards, any document which sets a level of achievement and criteria can be implied as a standard. Expanding on Sadler’s idea, Bridges (1997) concurred with him and argues that definition of an academic standard typically should include documents such as *qualifications frameworks*, *level descriptors* and *benchmarks* which are criteria against which the quality of an academic performance is assessed.

One of main concerns raised by the INQAAHE survey is the lack of necessary policies and criteria as well as guidelines to steer the QA processes. While this is an issue relating to regulatory framework and governance as discussed earlier, this is also an indication of lack of policies to guide standards. Therefore, lack of clear and transparent guidelines for what constitute acceptable standards makes it very difficult for QA agencies to operate in harmony with all stakeholders. One such example is a lack of policies identifying the consequences for compliance or non compliance with QA standards.

According to Jackson’s (1998) definition of standards, standards can define expectations and requirements. For instance, qualifications frameworks are standards as they set minimum requirements of qualifications. Perhaps one area in which Small States are very active is establishment of National Qualifications Frameworks (Keevy et al., 2008; Stella, 2010). NQFs have become one of the key instruments for quality assurance in many contexts such as in the Bologna Process (ENQA, 2008) and many countries around the world, including Small States. Keevy et al (2008) observe that although the purpose of qualification frameworks can vary, there are a number of common purposes for establishing NQFs such as establishment of national standards, promoting quality, and providing a system of coordination for comparing qualifications.

Often these guidelines are used as minimum requirements. The finding of the current study concurs that there is no room for controversy when it comes to minimum standards as all agree that it is very important. However, believing in something and making it a reality are totally different. According to Maldives case study, it was found that that Small States often struggle to develop the necessary guidelines and documentations needed to steer the QA system for higher education forward. This is again, largely, due to the lack of efficient human resources or qualified people to do that. Another issue related to availability of standards is transparency. In fact, In the Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve meeting of Ministers, which took place on 28-29 April, 2009, the EU Ministers referred to quality assurance standards and guidelines as “transparency tools”(ENQA, 2010, p. 1). Similarly, the participants of this study often link transparency of all the processes of the MQA to the efficiency of the QA system.

Service Delivery

The third element of a higher education quality assurance system noted in the conceptual framework and investigated by this study is service delivery. The two elements discussed above; regulatory framework and standards are crucial to have a good service delivery. QA processes related to service delivery of a higher education quality assurance system includes, quality assurance processes and related attributes. According to this study, the most important quality assurance processes identified by the participants are academic audit and accreditation. Transparency and collaboration emerged as related attributes that are important for a fully-functioning quality assurance system.

There are more processes handled by quality assurance agencies in Small States in addition to accreditation and academic audit. Notably such functions or services are registration, recognition of qualifications and articulation and conferral of institutions' titles (Barbados accreditation Council, 2010). However, giving focus on such functions, often undermines the focus on accreditation and academic audit, which many in this study believe where the real focus should be. In the case of the Maldives, due to the bulk of the process of qualification recognition handled by the MQA, little energy is left in MQA staff for accreditation and academic audit. The consequence is dissatisfaction by the HEIs in the way accreditation and academic audit is handled. This may well be the case in other Small States, especially those in the Caribbean.

This issue comes under service delivery, because the transparency referred to in this study is generally transparency of the services of the QA agency. This is often linked to the availability of the required guidelines and documentations for stakeholders. As discussed in the previous section, these standards and guidelines are also referred to as transparency tools. Though the quality assurance agency of the Maldives, which is MQA, claim all the necessary documentations are available to all stakeholders, HEIs often criticise on this front; saying that necessary documentations are not available sometimes. Thus, they point out that this is a matter of transparency as well.

The Maldives Qualifications Authority and other major stakeholders often raise the issue of the lack of capacity of MQA due to the lack of necessary human and physical resources. The slow progress of the conduct academic audit, as well as the slowness of the accreditation service are major hurdles in the quest for a better quality assurance system. Manuals, guidelines and other documentations are needed for academic audit to take place. However, many years have gone by without actually developing these necessary instruments. Likewise, it is taking months to give accreditation for academic programmes submitted to MQA by HEIs. Some efforts have been made to develop academic audit guidelines, but were not well received by HEIs. Therefore, a solution to this issue could be vital for a fully-functioning quality assurance system in the Maldives. MQA's view is that they need to grow together with the HEIs. This view is shared by HEIs. If a collaborative arrangement is set up, the HEIs and MQA together can develop guidelines such as the ones needed for academic audit, resulting in speedy implementation of the process. This sounds like a realistic option for Small States.

CONCLUSIONS

This study adopted a system-wide approach to developing a higher education quality assurance model for Small States and explored key elements in this area. The findings suggest that Small States face unique challenges in developing and establishing fully-functioning quality assurance systems for higher education. These challenges generally are related to the context of Small States, such as lack of human and physical resources, economy

of scale or small size of population, land area and Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The concept of vulnerability and its significant implications on Small States are now internationally recognised (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2007). Some of the regulatory models used by bigger nations may not be appropriate for Small States. This study only strengthens the belief that Small States need to develop higher education quality assurance systems that are fit for their purposes. This adds weight to the definition of quality as fit for purpose.

The lessons learned from the Maldives case study, indicate that Small States lag behind on issues of weak regulatory framework, required standards and external quality assurance. These three aspects have wider issues within. For instance, legislative arrangement, management structure of the national quality assurance body and the regulatory board are difficult areas for Small States to implement, which are all aspects of the regulatory framework. On the other hand, lack of standards, guidelines and documents required for different processes of quality assurance affect smooth running or even inability to implement those processes. For example, in the case of the Maldives, Maldives Qualifications Authority is unable to start the process of academic audit because there are no guidelines or criteria available. Likewise, external quality assurance or academic audit is much admired by higher education institutions, but often neglected by the national authorities. Figure 2 illustrates a tentative model with key elements and attributes of a higher education quality assurance for Small States in the light of the findings of this study and the literature review. This model is based on the systems theory concept. The main elements of a higher education quality assurance system identified in this study are regulatory framework, Standards and service delivery. The most influential attributes are policies and legislation under regulatory framework. Main attributes of the element of the standards is minimum requirements, guidelines and qualifications frameworks. Accreditation, audit and collaboration emerged as the main attributes of service delivery.

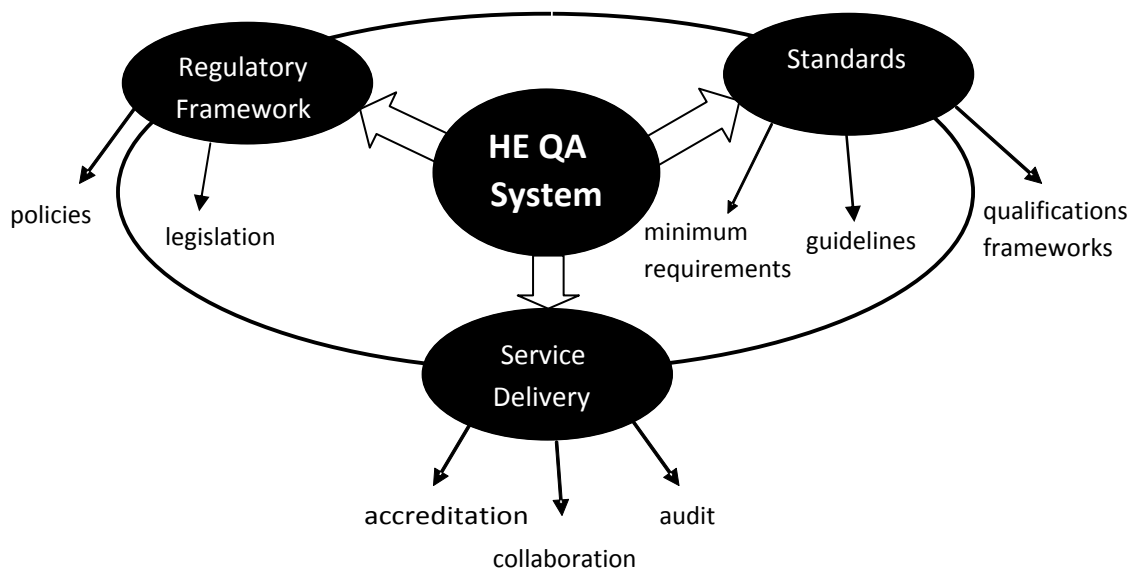


Figure 2: Elements of a higher education quality assurance system

Higher education quality assurance is a complex area. This complexity is perhaps doubled when applied to a Small States context because of endless challenges they face. One such challenge is identified by this study there is a conflict of interest, which is a major

hindrance in the face of setting up external audit panels. While the international best practice is to behave impartially and those who do not have conflict of interest with concerned institutions, it is quite rare for Small States to find experts without any conflict of interest. Some participants of this study even concluded that in the Maldives it is impossible to find people without any conflict of interest.

Citing the impasse regarding the inability of the Maldives Qualifications Agency to come up with guidelines for academic audit, the best suggestion explored by this study is the collaboration between the quality assurance body and the stakeholders, especially higher education institutions, in developing such standards and guidelines. The idea is that in doing so, the documents that are developed would be readily accepted by HEIs. Therefore, implementation of quality assurance processes would be more speedy and realistic. Another benefit of collaboration is that by collaboration with stakeholders, national bodies can overcome – to some extent – the issue of lack of human resources, which is often the reason behind slow progression of standards development.

Forgetting the unique and the difficult situations they are in, Small States often try to achieve band-aid solutions for setting up higher education quality assurance systems. Adopting systems used in developed nations, and creating quality assurance bodies by presidential decree –which is the case in Maldives – neglecting to establish a proper legislative arrangement, create problems rather than solving it.

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