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TRACK 3: QUALITY ASSURANCE IN TRANSNATIONAL ISSUES

Quality Assurance of Transnational Education (TE) in the English-speaking
Caribbean
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Introduction

Concepts of Transnational Education

Knight (2003) identifies a hierarchy of three common terms used to refer to the international nature of education. These terms are internationalization, cross-border education and trade in education. Internationalization is described as the most comprehensive term; cross-border education is described as one component of internationalization while international trade in education characterizes some cross-border activities. Cross-border education refers to a wide range of international activities in education, which relate to academic linkages and agreements, development/aid projects and commercial trade initiatives (Knight 2003). Trade in education services is interpreted as a subset of cross-border education and generally refers to activities having a commercial or for-profit purpose. Farrington (2001) indicates that the higher education system of some countries and the economics of education are likely to be significantly impacted by the growth in internationally-traded education services.

In this paper the discussion of transnational education will refer to trade in education services in the context of the liberalization of tertiary education and not

restricted to the World Trade Organisation's (WTO) General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS). Trade in education services also includes developments in distance education including the Internet which, by its very nature, is no respecter of national boundaries, and which features among the reasons for the interest of the WTO in liberalizing trade in educational services (Farrington, 2001, p. 64).

Quality Assurance and Accreditation

The term Quality Assurance is used in a general sense to include "…audit, evaluation, accreditation, and other review processes and elements." (Knight, 2003, p.13) Accreditation is seen to function as "…a seal of approval to academic operations." (Farrington, 2001,p.70) It is a mechanism for ensuring the approval or recognition of qualifications by a reputable authoritative body.

The increase in cross-border education by public and private higher education institutions poses new challenges for Quality Assurance mechanisms (Knight 2003). There is the added concern regarding international standards or criteria having the potential to jeopardize the sovereignty of national systems, thus resulting in unhealthy standardization. UNESCO, the OECD and the Council of Europe are key organizations which have made the transnational nature of higher education a high priority.

The GATS and other bilateral agreements are not setting out to establish rules for Quality Assurance and recognition of education, however, they precipitate the necessity of these issues being accorded urgent attention, (Knight, 2003).

Some Emerging Quality Assurance Concerns

The increase in local, regional and international education providers, the use of new delivery modes, the possibilities for increased student choice and mobility, all complicate the already difficult issues of credit transfers, advanced placement, articulation, recognition of qualifications and accreditation. The UNESCO Declaration anticipated the need for the development of international regulations for educational practice, and these issues are a priority focus of the UNESCO Global Forum on International Quality Assurance, Accreditation and the Recognition of Qualifications.

The importance of countries taking the initiative to determine the quality of the education they want offered within their borders, is supported by the 1998 UNESCO Declaration, which emphasizes the importance of providing assistance to developing countries to strengthen national educational systems rather than imposing "foreign models".

The expansion of the tertiary education sector in the English-speaking Caribbean highlights the importance of a system of quality assurance. There is a concern that the regional system should ensure consistency within this region as well as between this region and other regions. The CARICOM tertiary level education environment can be characterized as one in which individual countries are at different levels of development in terms of legislation, policy and procedure to govern access to their respective tertiary level education markets.

<u>The University of the West Indies (UWI) Task Force on the Liberalization of Higher Education</u>.

These concerns have led to action on the part of The University of the West Indies (UWI) which, in 2004, established a Task Force on the Liberalization of Higher Education its Impact on The UWI and Tertiary Education in the English-speaking Caribbean. In its January 2005 interim report, the Task Force summarized the status of the impact of liberalization. The report recognizes that a shortage of critical skills is a principal hindrance to the region's economic development and that there is thus a need for a quantum leap in the capacity to deliver quality education and training to citizens who demand, as their civil right, increased access to tertiary education.

In response to the increasing demand for tertiary level education and facilitated by the global treatment of tertiary education as a liberalized, trade-based service, Caribbean governments, The UWI's principal stakeholders, have taken steps over the last decade to invite foreign providers of education and training to assist in capacity building and as a means of attracting foreign direct investment. Within the context of the GATS, some governments, in 1994, made commitments in education, training, and research and development as part of the Uruguay Round of negotiations. Since then, there has been a proliferation of 'off-shore' universities in the region. These foreign 'for profit' universities initially targeted overseas students exclusively. However, in recent years, nationals of the host country now feature noticeably among the clientele. Further, some institutions have been granted national charters from host governments and consequently have changed their status from 'off-shore' to on-shore.

The unstructured and unregulated increase in institutions appearing to offer quality academic programmes is now a matter of significant concern within the region and especially within The UWI. The University Council, in response, established an expert Task Force to undertake research so as to assist regional governments in comprehending the GATS and its potential impact on the tertiary education sector and to inform measures necessary for the protection of the viability of The UWI as the regional institution of Higher Education. The interim report of this Task Force acknowledges that the tertiary education landscape has changed dramatically and that open competition in a 'knowledge market-place' is now the order of the day; that host governments view foreign institutions as lucrative investment opportunities and as contributing significantly to their GDP.

Areas of Penetration of Foreign Providers

The foreign providers offer a range of academic programmes. Areas of penetration include business, medicine, nursing, education, counseling, law, software development, management, accounting, and computer information systems. Certification provided ranges from Associate degrees, BSc degrees, MSc degrees and MBAs to Doctor of Medicine. The mode of delivery, while largely face-to-face, also includes distance, online and correspondence. (Hosein, Chen and Singh 2004). The expansion of 'for profit' foreign universities in the Caribbean is the most visible expression of the liberalization of global trade in higher education. These 'for profit' foreign universities engage in corporate style business within most communities. The creation of greater choice and the widening of access through resource sharing, resulting in capacity building are positive effects of the global joint venturing.

Concerns about TE in other developing countries, such as Mauritius and India, resonate in the English-speaking Caribbean. These include (i) the possibility that foreign providers may not share the same national values and priorities, since their purpose is to find the most cost effective way of providing education; (ii) the potential for quality to improve as a result of competition with reputable international institutions but also for quality to be lowered if low quality providers offer 'canned' degrees and (iii) quality education offered by reputable international providers being accessible only to the privileged few who can afford it.

The local tertiary education sector is concerned about the inferior or irrelevant programmes that foreign TLIs might offer and its ability to compete in an environment with resource constraints. CARICOM governments are concerned that, in the context of the GATS, private providers, operating on large economies of scale and quick return on financial investments, will not necessarily focus on appropriate curricula consistent with national developmental goals and social needs. (Hosein, Chen and Singh 2004. p . 32) Nonetheless, the sector is confident about its sustainable market share and its traditional reputation for quality.

Bearing in mind the extreme importance of the credibility of higher education programmes and qualifications for students, employers, the academic community and the public, the quality of all forms of cross-border education becomes a very serious issue. In this regard, issues which arise and which will be discussed, with a focus on the three main campus countries (Barbados, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago) of The University of the West Indies (UWI) are as follows:

1. The importance of a regional accreditation system, national accreditation councils and the monitoring of imported education

2. Domestic regulations for setting qualifications, quality standards and licenses

3. Provisions for monitoring

      (i)   the quality assurance programmes of foreign providers in relation to the reputation of institutions, their accreditation and degree recognition in their countries of origin and

      (ii)   the equivalence of the programme content to that delivered in other jurisdictions and particularly those in the northern hemisphere;

4. The preparedness of foreign providers to collaborate with national institutions

5. Provisions for monitoring the compatibility of the foreign providers' programmes with the national/regional development thrust

6. Distance Education.

The paper concludes with a discussion of the way forward for the English-speaking Caribbean in relation to Quality Assurance of TE.

1. <u>A Regional Accreditation System, National Accreditation Councils and the Monitoring of Imported Education</u>

The liberalization of the tertiary level education sector highlights the importance of a Regional Accreditation System in the Caribbean that will facilitate the seamless movement of students, faculty members and researchers, the transferability of credits and the preservation of intellectual property rights. (Hosein, Chen & Singh, 2004, p.ii)

It is noted, however, that institutional Quality Assurance (QA) frameworks have been established for only 21% of the 14 CARICOM countries (Roberts 2003) though

"elements and processes of quality assurance systems are in place to different degrees in all institutions" (Roberts, 2003, P. 19)

CARICOM has already established a regional mechanism for accreditation, equivalence and articulation (AEA) to guide governments in setting up their own national mechanisms. In response, Belize, Guyana, Jamaica, Trinidad Tobago, Barbados, St. Kitts, and Suriname have established national systems to monitor tertiary level education providers and to establish standards of performance.

Although in the Caribbean the development of national bodies has taken place with some collaborative effort, initiatives to establish accreditation agencies have been undertaken within national boundaries. Each of the larger territories i.e. Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad and Guyana has its own agency but for the smaller countries of the Eastern Caribbean, the establishment of one national agency for the OECS region is under consideration.

The status of national accreditation bodies varies considerably among countries. The University Council of Jamaica (UCJ) is a legal statutory body which has been operating for over 15 years.While the majority of institutions accredited by UCJ are local, the Council also accredits programmes offered in Jamaica by overseas institutions. In Trinidad and Tobago, a National Accreditation Council was established in 2004 and has begun to function. The Act recognizes the Council as the principal body in Trinidad and Tobago for conducting and advising on the accreditation and recognition of post secondary and tertiary educational and training institutions, programmes and awards, whether local or foreign. In Barbados The Barbados Accreditation Council Act 2004-

2011 has been signed into Law. However, the Council to administer this legislation has not yet been set up**.** When established, the Council is expected to have a very wide remit. For the time being, the Ministry of Education in Barbados registers institutions that meet specified criteria. This is not a verification of quality but simply permission to operate. In the case of Barbados and Trinidad and Tobago, the establishment of the national Accreditation Councils represents these countries' first step towards the development of a seamless education and training system and a National Qualifications Framework.

Functions of the councils

 The functions of the national accreditation councils in Barbados, Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago include the registration of local, regional and foreign-based institutions that offer educational courses in the respective countries, advising on the recognition of foreign-based institutions and their awards, developing and maintaining a unified system of credits for institutions and establishing relationships with national regional and international accreditation bodies. The councils also have the responsibility to protect the interests of the public by providing information on the quality and recognition of programmes of study and institutions. In theory, the councils then can act as a watchdog to determine the quality of provision of regional and international higher education institutions.

Whether the national accreditation councils of Barbados, Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago have the technical capacity to deal with the influx of programmes expected with the further liberalization of the tertiary education sector will have to be assessed in time. The procedures likely to be involved are expensive and time consuming, and may require substantial resources. This scenario would seem to contradict the provisions of

GATS Article 6.4 which treats with domestic regulations and a country's ability "…to set qualifications, quality standards and licenses." (Knight 2003, p. 12) According to this article, ensuring the quality of the education service via qualifications, requirements and procedures, technical standards and licensing is not more burdensome than necessary. However, Knight describes the language of Article 6.4 as "purposely vague", with no definitions for "more burdensome than necessary" and for " quality of services." Consequently, it leaves the higher education sector worried about this statement's potential impact on quality assurance and accreditation procedures. Since governments have a central role in ensuring a country's ability to set quality assurance and accreditation policy for domestic and foreign providers, it is recommended that this statement be monitored closely by the education sector. (Knight, 2003).

2. Domestic Regulations for Setting Qualifications, Quality Standards And Licenses

With respect to the liberalization of the tertiary level education sector, the role of CARICOM governments is seen as a regulatory one, in ensuring that frameworks exist to maintain quality in service, qualifications recognition, licensing and accreditation. Regulations of the national accreditation bodies or relevant Ministries will govern all local institutions, public and private. Regulations for incoming TLIs have not been made specific or different from those for local TLIs. These regulations address (i) confirmation that the institution/programme is accredited by an appropriate accreditation body;
(ii) making public the standards for registration and the accreditation of the programmes of foreign providers (Jamaica) and (iii) establishing licensing bodies or boards to regulate the standards of all professional groups and, in particular, the teaching profession (Jamaica). (Hosein, Chen and Singh, 2004, p.33)

3. Provisions for Monitoring:

        (i)   **the Quality Assurance Programmes of Foreign Providers in Relation to the Reputation of the Institutions, their Accreditation and Degree Recognition in their Countries of Origin;**

        (ii)   **the Equivalence of the Programme Content to that Delivered in other Jurisdictions and Particularly those in the Northern Hemisphere***;*

UCJ reports that each foreign provider has to submit a proposal for which UCJ has prepared guidelines in a questionnaire format. Specific information relating to accreditation status in their home country, for example, is sought. Based on UCJ's acceptance of the proposal, a team/representative from UCJ visits the 'country of origin' campus of the provider to determine the nature of the programmes and institution from which the programmes are offered. Depending on their findings, the institution may be granted registration, which allows operations to begin in Jamaica.

Conditions to be met by foreign institutions applying to be accredited in Trinidad and Tobago include (i) proof that the institution is accredited in its country of origin; (ii) qualifications having to be accredited in the country of origin; and (iii) programmes requiring specialized accreditation being accredited with the relevant recognized professional body in the country of origin.

Regarding the accreditation in Trinidad and Tobago of foreign programmes being offered through local affiliation arrangements, institutions must satisfy conditions relating to (i) the supervision of the parent institution and (ii) comparable quality of the programme to the counterpart in the country of origin. Post secondary and tertiary qualifications awarded to individuals as a result of studies abroad will be recognized by ACTT on its determination that the programme was accredited by the relevant authority in the foreign country at the time of the award.

(Policy Paper, Proposal for the Establishment of the Accreditation Council of Trinidad and Tobago, pp.19-20).

4. The Preparedness of Foreign Providers to Collaborate with Local Institutions

There is a measure of collaboration between foreign providers and national institutions in the English-speaking Caribbean. In terms of regional colleges and universities, extra regional articulation and accreditation arrangements with foreign universities are in place for about 50% of institutions (Roberts 2003). Currently, over one hundred foreign universities are operating in the English-speaking Caribbean, and the number is still growing.

Foreign institutions in the region operate either virtually or in various forms of commercial presence, often in the form of partnerships with local TLIs, with which they may have a financing relationship. Brandon (2003) has documented many cases of foreign providers collaborating with national institutions in his report *New External Providers of Tertiary Education* in the Caribbean, prepared for the UNESCO

International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (IESALC). TE in the English-speaking Caribbean is delivered through foreign universities, twinning partners or university alliances; providers approaching corporate universities; for-profit providers; virtual universities; open and distance universities and other modes such as "… private locally owned institutions that are now providing teaching for qualifications in the tertiary market-place." (Brandon, 2003, p.21).

Foreign universities are those foreign institutions that have come to the Caribbean to teach their own programmes outside of a twinning or partnership arrangement. Brandon reports a few cases where "off-shore," foreign-owned providers have acquired land locally and built extensively. In respect of twinning partners or university alliances, the local institution may only provide space and logistical support or its staff may assist in course delivery. In some cases there may even be moves towards greater sharing, by localizing course content to some extent, for example. Entities in the English-speaking Caribbean which are approaching the functioning of corporate universities include banks, insurance companies and telecommunications providers engaging in considerable training. Generally this training is "in-house" and not linked with the rest of the tertiary education system.

Medicine targets mainly students from outside of the region, though "…a small number of local students are being recruited, and some schools have subsidized rates of tuition for Caribbean students. These numbers remain small, in part because none of the off-shore schools is yet recognized by the Governments of the region so that graduates can practice medicine. This is likely to change fairly rapidly when a new regional

mechanism for accrediting medical degrees is set up. " (Brandon, 2003, p.32.) Of the 12 medical schools operating in the Caribbean only 5 met or exceeded 75% of the stated criteria in all evaluation categories of the American Association of International Medical Graduates (AAIMG) founded in 1992 to promote acceptance of US medical graduates from international schools into mainstream American medical practice. (Roberts 2001).

4. <u>Open and Distance Education and the Role of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) in the Activities of New Providers.</u>

There is a significant role for the Internet in the activities of external providers. Many institutions rely heavily on Internet materials and some on the more traditional distance education materials. Some programmes make use of videoconferencing while audioconferencing is also used occasionally. External providers are likely to discover the Caribbean cultural preference for "…face to face interaction and for group learning rather than isolated self-instruction." (Brandon, 2003, p.46) Nonetheless, Hosein, Chen and Singh (2004), highlight the impact of Information Communication Technologies (ICT) in the region and note that "ICTs are the engine which fuels the growth of cross border tertiary education and training over the Internet…" (p.11); that the digital divide has grown so tremendously that it   leaves CARICOM TLI's in very uncompetitive positions. In Trinidad and Tobago, institutions providing distance education are now expected to be guided by the principles of the ACTT in such areas as curriculum and instruction, facilities and technology, administration and finance.

Where open and distance universities are concerned, there are several programmes operating in the English-speaking Caribbean which involve residence at a campus for short periods or engagement in regular group sessions. Such sessions may be at a distance from the provider or conducted via teleconferences or with local tutorial support. There exist 16 external sources of distance education programmes from reputable external providers in the English-speaking Caribbean.

"Many distance education programmes (such as UWI's own) rely heavily on local tutorial support and thus demand that their providers take some care about the quality of such local teaching. … professional organisations often evaluate those who wish to provide teaching for their qualifications…" (Brandon, 2003, p.25).

ICTs constitute the most significant factor in the growth of borderless higher education and, given the importance of 'connectivity' in borderless education, it is predicted that an increased use of new ICTs will fuel further the quality and expansion of, as well as access to higher education. (Middlehurst, 2001). Over the past decade, the higher education landscape has been shaped by convergence of technologies and of networks. Middlehurst (2001) cites Tait and Mills who argue "…that distinctions between traditional and distance providers will disappear, to be replaced by mixed-mode education, substantially centred on C&IT." (p.9) Given the earlier comments in this paper about the cultural preferences in the Caribbean for 'face-to-face' interaction this is likely to be a development that would further place foreign providers in greater competition with local TLIs. Indeed, Middlehurst concludes that given the nature of the on-going developments in the domain of ICTs, boundaries of previously separate sectors and businesses are being eroded, new markets, combinations of products and services are

being created as well as "…potentially, new competitors and partners for higher education." (p.10)

5. **Provisions for Monitoring the Compatibility of the Foreign Providers' Programme with the National/ Regional Development Thrust**

In Jamaica, how to bridge the cultural gap is one of the questions in the proposal questionnaire, which overseas institutions have to complete. They are asked to indicate the Caribbean material and demonstrate from the bibliographies of their course outlines the extent of the Caribbean material they will be including. Examples, case studies, research studies and projects are expected to be Caribbean based. Although this is an element which is raised by the UCJ, it really depends on the interest and commitment of the provider to ensure that this is done. There remains, therefore, the issue of effective monitoring.

In Trinidad and Tobago, the Government has decided to proceed with caution on the issue of setting policy to govern the compatibility of programmes of foreign providers with the country's socio-economic context and, for the time being, has adopted the strategy of overseeing this via its monitoring of the partnership arrangements between indigenous public and private institutions and foreign providers. It has taken the stance of awaiting the advice of CARICOM in view of the imminence of the establishment of the CSME and its provisions for the employability and mobility of Caribbean citizens, and in

recognition of the fact that its decisions regarding the programmes of foreign providers will have implications for other neighbouring CARICOM countries.

Charting a way Forward for the English-speaking Caribbean in Relation to Quality Assurance of Transnational Education

A review of some international trends

Outside the ambit of the GATS, there is ongoing debate on the need for guidelines for higher education providers, in terms of quality assurance, accreditation and recognition of qualifications. UNESCO and the OECD are collaborating on the drafting of "Joint Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-Border Higher Education." The aim is to assist member countries, and this is especially needed in the Caribbean, to develop appropriate methodologies and mechanisms to cover both national and foreign providers of academic programmes in order to maximize the benefits and limit the potential downsides of the internationalization of Higher Education.

International developments in quality assurance and accreditation as described by Van Damme (2002), provide the English-speaking Caribbean with the opportunity to identify elements suited to the regional tertiary level institutional culture and some of these are identified in Table 1

Table1.International Developments in Quality Assurance of Transnational Education and their Implications for the Caribbean

International Development	Implications for the Caribbean
In many countries legislation has been introduced requiring private, foreign providers to be registered by government departments responsible for education and to secure a licence to teach.	An indication that the English-speaking Caribbean is moving in the right direction but would need to give serious consideration to the issue of being licensed to teach
In Europe, national quality assurance agencies are being urged to assume responsibility for monitoring the quality of imported education.	The English-speaking Caribbean would need to ensure the full and effective implementation of the relevant legislation
Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education, adopted in 2001 by the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee	An example of policy aimed at protecting the student as consumer
Bologna Declaration June 1999 Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation (APEC).	Introduction of a common framework of degrees Quality Assurance dimensions with comparable criteria and methods
Regional Free Trade agreements	Stimulation of convergence in Quality Assurance, mutual recognition of professional qualifications, student mobility and credit transfer schemes
The 1995 Internationalization Quality Review (IQR), jointly developed by the Institutional Management of Higher Education (IMHE) of the OECD, the Academic Co-operation Association (ACA) and the European Association of Universities	Awareness of instruments designed to assess quality aspects of an institution's internationalization activities and policies and to inform national policy regarding quality assurance of transnational education

International Development	Implications for the Caribbean
Washington Accord	Mutual recognition of professional qualifications
European Credit Transfer System	A framework for the recognition of delineated components of study to facilitate the transferability of credits
Networking among universities	Benchmarking and to inform the development of internal quality assurance systems; filling the void at the international level, left by national quality assurance agencies not desirous of engaging in international activities.
Guidelines for the evaluation of electronically offered academic degrees and certificate programmes (a collaborative effort between the Western Co-operative for Educational Telecommunication [WCET]; the Commission of Regional Accrediting Commissions [CRAC] and the American Distance Education Consortium [ADEC], inter alia.) and	Guidelines which can inform the development of nationa/regional criteria for quality assurance of distance education
A comprehensive overview of principles, guidelines, and benchmarks for distributed and on-line learning (developed by the Institute for Higher Education Policy [IHEP])	

A CARICOM Regional Accreditation Body

Regional initiatives to establish a CARICOM accreditation body for tertiary education (Joseph, 2004), are being expanded in the face of the GATS and the general liberalization of the tertiary level education sector. The recent implementation of the Caribbean Accreditation Authority for Education in Medicine and other Health professsions was an initiative undertaken in the face of the withdrawal of the General Medical Council of Britain from accreditation of medical education in universities of Commonwealth countries, including the University of the West Indies. This addresses one major area of study but the broader regional accreditation of tertiary and higher education institutions and programmes is a priority. Some of the issues with which a regional body would have to be concerned include:

- A framework outlining Caribbean standards of tertiary education

- Rationalization of methods of assessment

- Policies to limit and/or seriously monitor the registration and functioning of extra regional providers within the Caribbean

- A framework to allow for credit transfers, articulation and advanced placement

- Proposals for national, regional and international accreditation

- Partnerships in transnational education which include collaboration on Quality Assurance and mutual recognition issues.

The issue of benchmarking may also be an important element in the quality assurance and regulatory considerations. Benchmarks outline general expectations about the standards for the award of qualifications at a given level and articulate the attributes and capabilities that those possessing such qualifications should be able to demonstrate.(The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education.) Such benchmarks

can be valuable to institutions carrying out internal quality reviews and also serve as important guidelines and as reference points for external reviews.

Caribbean governments, tertiary and higher education institutions will have to make serious policy decisions in the face of increasing global competition for the tertiary education dollar, and the treatment of education as though it is a purely commercial service. The preservation of quality in the educational offerings made to the Caribbean people must be foremost; it must supercede profitability, and this will require action on several fronts. An overriding consideration will have to be development of national and regional institutions to ensure the levels of relevance, responsiveness, innovation, quality and accountability necessary to meet the needs of students, employers and the developing societies. Another will have to be the regulation and monitoring of extra regional providers and cross border suppliers of education to ensure that the quality education product expected in the Caribbean is not in any way compromised. It is vital that governments and institutions become fully apprised of the conditions of the GATS and that where there has not yet been commitment to the Agreement careful consideration be given to its provisions and conditions. Where, as in the case of Jamaica, there has already been unconditional acceptance of the terms of the Agreement, strategies for dealing with its implementation must be developed and it is critical that there be full and open discussion on these matters and that educators be involved in the development of strategies designed to preserve education as both public good and personal gain.

Maintaining high regional standards is seen as equipping regional institutions to successfully compete with international HE providers. There is a clear imperative for

regional convergence to precede international convergence in quality assurance systems and mechanisms in developing common standards across tertiary level institutions for degrees/ diplomas. Common criteria and methods of Quality Assurance should be applied by these institutions. The Caricom initiative should therefore be seen as providing an over arching framework into which the National bodies would connect. In this scenario certification of professional qualifications which will facilitate the free movement of professionals across the region can act as a catalyst to speed up the process of convergence in quality assurance systems. While arriving at consensus among so many nation states is challenging, there is no doubt as to the imperative to create a network in which Quality Systems and accreditation arrangements converge and are harmonized in the context of the increasing international trade in higher education. These must also be extended to less traditional modes of learning such as distance education and e-learning.

Meanwhile, The Caribbean Regional Negotiating Machinery has recommended that CARICOM countries take advantage of this opportunity to create niches for exporting education. Potentially lucrative areas exist in tourism, medicine and education. Information and communication technologies, which facilitate the cross border reach, are believed to allow CARICOM countries to maintain competitiveness and provide the infrastructure for distance education and on-line programming. The Caribbean must now organize itself to be not just importers of transnational education but exporters also. Quality Assurance will prove to be key to its success.

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