

## Quality Assurance in the European Union, Latin American & the Caribbean: Past, Present and Future

*"We should recall Jean Monnet's saying when looking back at the first decades of the European integration that if he had to do it all over again, he would start with education"<sup>1</sup>.*

### **Introduction**

With the rise of the 'network' society, reconstruction of the global economic systems, political changes, and increased human mobility, the world is seeing a time when society's needs are more complex than ever. Traditionally, the role of education has been to develop individuals for their own sakes and to fit them for life in the society into which they were born. It is safe to say that education still plays this role in today's society. It is through education (formal, informal, and non-formal) that citizens gain, "...knowledge and understanding of social, legal and political systems...skills and aptitudes to make use of that knowledge and understanding...and... [are] endowed with values and dispositions to put their knowledge and skills to beneficial use" (Heater, 1999, 164). Beneficial is the key word here. What is taught and promoted depends on government's values. This still holds true today, only that, with the driving force of globalization, the nature of education is changing—its purpose, its 'customers', its accountability (to society), etc. The impact of these changes to education have shifted towards the need to

“...create new and tremendously important demands and exigencies towards universities as knowledge-centres, an increase in the demand for higher education worldwide, erosion of the national regulatory and policy frameworks, the emerging 'borderless' higher education market (Damme, 2001, p.2)

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<sup>1</sup> Source: (Damme, 2003, p.135)

As a region of the world, striving to enhance its education system to better address these issues, Europe has not only begun developing its own education system; but, it is now moving towards working with and learning from other regions--as it is clear that force of globalization is not only affecting European higher education, but also higher education in all parts of the world. The ‘Building Relationships and Improving Dialogue Geared towards Erasmus Mundus Goals - Latin American and the Caribbean’ (BRIDGES-LAC) project is co-financed by the European Commission and has the aim of consolidating the relations between the European Union (EU), Latin American and the Caribbean (LAC) in the area of higher education by strengthening the international dimension of quality assurance (QA) in higher education<sup>2</sup>.

Attention is give to QA as critical in the enhancement and improvement of higher education because, when QA is realized,

“...it will enhance the relevance of programmes, employability and the student experience... [promote] the mobility of students as well as of academic staff and graduates... [promote] the transparency of higher education systems...[and] increase mutual trust between different national systems...” (Wahlers, 2007, p.9).

In this paper, I will discuss the definition and different concepts of quality, some functions and methodologies of QA, the different levels of QA, and explore the current situation of QA in the EU and LAC in hopes that I can shed some light on current initiatives taking place between the EU and LAC and what else is still needed in the development of the international dimensions of QA.

## **Quality Assurance**

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<sup>2</sup> Source: (BRIDGES-LAC, 2008)

Quality in higher education is very complex as it refers to the educational model-- mission and objectives, standards within the system—and depending on how quality is defined, its function, methodology, and effect on higher education will differ. Today, there is no absolute definition of quality; however different people or institutions have come up with their own definitions. The explanation for why there is no current, agreed upon definition of quality is due to a few reasons. The first is related to how one defines the concept of quality.

### Concepts of Quality

The most common concepts of quality are: Quality as...

- *Excellence Standards* -a programme is seen as of better quality the lower the number of successful students is and drives institutions to selective intake<sup>3</sup>
- *Fitness for Purpose* - relates quality to the purposes and objectives of an institution or a programme and brings quality assurance procedures to check and to improve the degree to which the actual operation of the institution or programme helps to realise those objectives<sup>4</sup>
- *Fitness of Purpose* – Fitness of purpose evaluates whether the quality-related intentions of an organisation are adequate.
- *Consumer Satisfaction* - stresses the importance of the expectations of direct and indirect consumers, namely students, families, employers, other stakeholders and society at large [which] aspires to force institutions and programmes to look more to these external demands<sup>5</sup>
- *Value for Money* - refers to quality judged against monetary cost and is seen by stakeholders in terms of return on investment<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Source: (Damme, 2003, p.143)

<sup>4</sup> Source: (Damme, 2003, p.143)

<sup>5</sup> Source: (Damme, 2003, p.143)

<sup>6</sup> Source: (Newton, 2007, p.15)

- *Perfection* - measurement of process standards<sup>7</sup>
- *Transformation* - refers to the development or empowerment of the student through the learning process, or to institutional changes which might transform student learning<sup>8</sup>

These different concepts of quality significantly influence the definition of quality in relation to QA as does the person you ask to define it. QA "...is carried out by individuals and groups of individuals that are situated in cultural and linguistic systems which have an impact on everything they do" (Crozier et. al., 2007, p.6). This is easily seen in the context of regional networks. In order for several countries to work together, a common 'working language' must be chosen. This results in a certain portion of the network, however big or small; to work in a language other than their mother tongue; which will affect one's understanding or way of defining quality. One must also keep in mind *who* these people are. Key stakeholders in QA of higher education include: the state, employers, the academic world, students, parents and society at large. Each stakeholder has a different idea of what 'proper' quality is and each expects something different from the higher education institution.

### Definitions

Some of the major QA networks, higher education networks and other regional networks connected to higher education—such as, International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), Ibero-American Network of Accreditation Agencies (RIACES), European Students' Union (ESU), Map of Higher Education of Latin American and the Caribbean (MESALC)—have come up with their own definitions of QA. While almost all those listed above mention something about quality assurance as a process of evaluating whether or not predetermined standards or requirements

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<sup>7</sup> Source: (Newton, 2007, p.15)

<sup>8</sup> Source: (Newton, 2007, p.15)

are met, at a second glance, the ‘concept of quality’ is different in the INQAAHE definition is geared towards a more ‘customer satisfaction/value for money’ approach versus the rest, which are primarily looking at ‘fitness for purpose’ and ‘fitness of purpose’. The person(s) defining quality, the cultural context and the concept of quality used are just a few of the factors that can explain why certain institutions, nations or even regions define quality as they do. Wahlers (2007) put it best when writing:

“...as long as quality assurance is limited to national borders, there is no problem with definitions of the quality, standards and methodology applied...[but] as soon as students and graduates start crossing borders, the situation changes. Others start asking questions about our quality and about our quality label” (p.18).

## QA Systems

After a general overview of *what* quality is, we must take a closer look at *how* it looks. There is no ‘one-size fits all’ approach to quality and therefore, one can identify many differences between the functions and methodologies of QA. The variations in QA can be attributed to a number of factors; ranging from the responsible agency to the voluntary or compulsory nature of participation, from the focus on research or teaching to the disciplines and institutions themselves, from the way of reporting to the range of follow-up activities<sup>9</sup>. Again, these variations exist because QA is situated within a cultural context—whether it is national, regional or global.

Knowing this, Newton (2007), lists the following characteristics that typically contribute to an effective QA system. He says that an effective QA system:

“...[has] clear specification of roles, responsibilities and procedures, enables institutional aims and objectives to be achieved, informs decision making, is free from

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<sup>9</sup> Source: (Damme, 2003, p.146)

individual bias, is repeatable over time, involves staff, includes the specification of standards and acceptable evidence, prompts continuous improvement (HEQC, 1994)" (p.16).

These characteristics are essential to form the foundation of a proper functioning system. If transparency and involvement of all (relevant) stakeholders are not considered, the QA system cannot and will not be as effective as it could be. There needs to be clarity, focus and commitment to the system (by the institution and staff), its processes and to the concept of continuous improvement if QA will actually enhance the quality of education at a given institution.

### **Different Levels<sup>10</sup> and Methodologies of QA**

As each QA system will differ, so will the methodologies used. Many of these will be used in a typical QA system; however, the exact manner in which they are used, how often and what is done with the results will vary.

#### Internal Quality Assurance

This type of system is implemented in order to improve the overall quality of the institution. The overall function is very broad, covering all relevant quality aspects over which an institution has control (total quality management) and it is meant to be a continuous process. Some tools used at the institutional level include:

- *Self-Evaluation* – This is widely used because it is an internal activity which makes it more cost-effective and more easily accepted by the institution staff.

#### National External Quality Assurance

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<sup>10</sup> Source: (Damme, 2003, p. 47-49)

There is mixed ownership between state and higher education institutions in this type of system. Its scope is very broad (it is not meant to be used for total coverage of all quality aspects) and the evaluation period is typically every 5 - 10yrs. Methodologies used at this level include:

- *Peer Review* – This usually takes place alongside of a self-evaluation. Institutions might use this method in order to benchmark their self-evaluation results with outside views. Using it as a compliment to the self-evaluation is more effective as the power of comparison is quite strong in this regard.
- *Statistical Information* – This type of information is generated from surveys of students, graduates and sometimes staff, either by an internal department or external agency.
- *Quality Audit* – This is where the institutions themselves control the quality assurance process. Here, the audit is a meta-review of the functioning of the quality control mechanisms itself and often is the responsibility of the governmental level<sup>11</sup>.

### Supranational Schemes of Accreditation

The international or supranational level is quite complex in that the system can look a number of ways. This could include ‘real’ international systems of accreditation, accreditation of other accreditation agencies, etc. The overall function is less broad than that of national arrangements, as it covers only those quality aspects that are relevant for the international objectives. One example is the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE).

Although INQAAHE exists and is definitely making its mark on QA in many countries around the world, the reality is that the concept of QA is still being explored and

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<sup>11</sup> Source: (Damme, 2003, p.146)

that the idea of speaking about a truly global system seems too distant. An explanation for this could be that "...international quality assurance networks mainly serve to exchange experience and to draw up codes of good practice, [and] regional quality assurance systems aim to develop joint quality assurance manuals, to synchronise self-evaluations and peer reviews, and to develop basic standards" (Wahlers, 2007, p.6). Regional networks have the ability to be more influential in the area of QA because there are slightly more commonalities for countries within the same region (could be language, political ideologies, geography, economic status, etc), it seems more likely that a common approach to QA can be achieved. Like any supranational scheme, in this day and age, there are no legal jurisdiction for regional agencies and networks; however, because it's a bit smaller and more focused on the needs of the region, it might be more likely to get buy in from relevant stakeholders. In order for a regional network to succeed, "...participants must be able to recognise the academic capabilities of others...learn from each other...and open up towards sharing and collaboration" (Wahlers, 2007, p.38).

### National Commitment to QA Networks & Agencies

At this point, it is important to discuss the consequences of this complex, multi-layer scheme in which nations are finding themselves stuck in the middle of. One factor that must be considered and discussed when an institution volunteers or is obligated to work with QA (at any level) is the possibility of any type of conflict of interest. Typically, the most risk is involved at the national level; when an institution is working with a national level QA agency. There is a risk because, oftentimes, national level agencies are funded by the government, or ministries of education. Whenever money is involved, it means those funding the initiative will have some type of influence on the activities being funded. According to this logic, to lessen the risk of influence from the state, or any other institution, the QA

agency or network must decrease its dependency on a single funding source. The more sources providing monetary and human resources, the less risk there is of any one institution or governing body having lots of influence. This is key, as one important factor of QA is to protect institutional autonomy.

Another consequence is the possibility of an institution ‘being obligated to’ or ‘voluntarily’ being a member of multiple networks and/or agencies. This could propose problems in the future as to which agency one is ‘loyal’ to, which set of criteria one will follow, etc. A general trend is that the strongest link is at the institution-national level and secondary to that is the link to the region<sup>12</sup>.

Because of this complex nature of establishing regional networks, only few exist in the EU and LAC regions. In the EU, there is something called the E4; which consists of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), the European University Association (EUA), the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE), and the European Students’ Union (ESU). Another entity that is playing a large role in the EU is the European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education (ECA). In LAC, the major regional networks include: the Ibero-American Network of Accreditation Agencies (RIACES), the Caribbean Area Network for Quality Assurance in Tertiary Education (CANQATE), UNESCO International Institute of Higher Education for Latin America and the Caribbean (IESALC), the Central American Accreditation Council (CCA), and the Central American Superior Council for Higher Education (CSUCA).

The previous pages were meant to provide a theoretical framework for what QA is and to highlight the complexities surrounding the establishment of such practices—whether it be at the national, regional or supranational level. The following pages will provide an introduction to the current status of QA of higher education in the EU and LAC, the regional

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<sup>12</sup> In EU, since the ministers of education signed the ENQA ESG agreement, they are ‘bound’ to it. It is not a legal obligation to follow in that the European Commission can or will penalize a member-state for not following; however, the signature is symbolic of an agreement made and thus is ‘binding’.

contributions of those major agencies and networks listed above, and how these two regions can work together to continue developing good practices of QA in both regions.

## **Quality Assurance Today: The EU**

### Signing the Bologna Declaration

In 1999, the Bologna Declaration was signed<sup>13</sup>, which signified the beginning of a new era for higher education in the EU. This declaration aimed to create a European Higher Education Area (EHEA), promote competition and attractiveness of higher education in the EU, promote transparency based on a 2-cycle system (bachelor and master), and to develop easily readable and comparable degrees. Also, it aimed to help facilitate mobility of students, graduates and higher education staff; prepare students for their future careers; and offer high-quality higher education (Benelux, 2009).

This shifted the entire way higher education systems functioned along with their aims. Prior to Bologna, higher education was based at the national level, addressing national needs. If and when QA existed, it was primarily based on fitness for purpose concept of quality, which was process-oriented and aimed to hold the institutions accountable for what they promised to offer. After Bologna, everything changed; from a European dimension addressing international needs, to a fitness of purpose concept of quality, which is output-oriented and focuses on criteria-based accreditation.

These changes, although agreed upon by all those who signed the Bologna Declaration, is not meant to mislead one to assume this was easily agreed upon. The relationship between the EU and the state is quite delicate and must be noted. It is true that

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<sup>13</sup> Prior to the signing of the Bologna Declaration, QA in Europe existed in few countries. The pioneers in this area were France, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. The three countries recognized the massification of higher education, the growing autonomy of institutions, the changing relationship between higher education institutions and the labor market, competition and consumerism were all important factors that pointed to the development of QA processes and systems. These three countries used different models; however, each included self-assessment, external assessment, public report and follow-up in their processes (Vroeijenstijn, 2008).

the European Commission (EC) makes recommendations to its member-states; however, whether a member-state complies is not always as voluntary as one might think. The signing of any (provision) is voluntary in the sense that it is up to the member-state to decide whether or not to 'opt-out'; however, the European experiences have shown that a type of "...[peer pressure] between countries has driven the regional efforts, with no country wanting to be left behind its neighbors, even though countries do not like being told what to do by any regional authority..." (Wahlers, 2007, p.34).

### Developments Since Bologna

Within the education sector, the 80's and 90's brought about a shift from quality as excellence to quality as fitness for purpose. Then again, it changed to a more consumer satisfaction concept. In the near future, we can expect a resurgence of the <<excellence standards>> approach as institutions try to distinguish themselves from their competitors and ranking practices become more widespread (Damme, 2003, p.145). Proof of this change can be seen in some major initiatives taken in order to achieve QA in higher education, including the TUNING Educational Structures in Europe project and the adoption of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area.

TUNING Educational Structures in Europe started in 2000 as a project to link the political objectives of the Bologna Process and at a later stage the Lisbon Strategy to the higher educational sector (TUNING, 2009). As a whole, Tuning, while respecting institutional autonomy, aimed to assist institutions in the current education reform<sup>14</sup> (which focused on comparability of curricula and quality and transferability of higher education).

Since Bologna, the Ministers of Education have gathered at a series of bi-annual meetings to discuss a number of issues—one being quality assurance of higher education. In

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<sup>14</sup> This is a result of the Lisbon Treaty and Bologna Process.

2001, the ministers 'encouraged' the idea of quality assurance systems, but made no real focus on this issue. In 2003, it was said that "the quality of higher education has proven to be at the heart of the setting up of a European Higher Education Area" (Realising, 2003, p.3). It was here that a formal request was made to develop a set of guidelines for QA and in 2005, at the Bergen meeting, the ministers adopted the European Standards and Guidelines for Higher Education (ESG), proposed by ENQA (European Higher, 2005). By the 2007 meeting in London, "...all countries [had] started to implement them and some [had] made substantial progress" (Towards, 2007, p4).

The most recent of these meetings took place 28-29 April 2009 in Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium. The final report, the Leuven-Communiqué, beings by reconfirming the agreement made to work towards a EHEA and it highlights some of the objectives met from the Bologna Declaration. They discussed higher education priorities for the decade to come, which include the areas of: social dimension: equitable access and completion; lifelong learning; employability; student-centred learning and the teaching mission of higher education; education, research and innovation; international openness; mobility; data collection; multidimensional transparency tools; and funding<sup>15</sup>. Regarding the organizational structure and follow-up, it was decided that the current structure is endorsed as being fit for purpose. The next meeting will be the Bologna Anniversary conference jointly hosted by Austria and Hungary in Budapest and Vienna on 11- 12 March 2010; while the next ministerial conferences will be hosted by Romania in Bucharest on 27-28 April 2012. Looking further, ministerial conferences will be held in 2015, 2018 and 2020.

Another advancement in the path towards harmonization of quality assurance comes from the European Consortium for Accreditation (ECA). In 2008, fifteen of its members

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<sup>15</sup> (Bologna, 2009).

agreed to follow the same code of good practice and by signing this agreement, have recognized the results of each others' accreditation procedures (European, 2008).

One tool fully operational since summer of 2008 is The European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR)<sup>16</sup>, which publishes and manages "...a register of quality assurance agencies that substantially comply with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG) to provide the public with clear and reliable information on quality assurance agencies operating in Europe" (EQAR, 2009). This register is expected to:

- promote student mobility by providing a basis for the increase of trust among higher education institutions;
- reduce opportunities for "accreditation mills" to gain credibility;
- provide a basis for governments to authorise higher education institutions to choose any agency from the Register, if that is compatible with national arrangements;
- provide a means for higher education institutions to choose between different agencies, if that is compatible with national arrangements; serve as an instrument to improve the quality of agencies and to promote mutual trust among them. (EQAR, 2009).

EQAR is web-based, freely accessible and allows users to search for QA agencies by countries it is based in or operates in<sup>17</sup>. As of April 15, 2009, EQAR lists nine (9) QA agencies, active in twelve (12) European countries<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> The EQAR Association, an international non-profit association under Belgian law...has been founded by the E4 organizations to independently operate the Register of quality assurance agencies. Members of the association are the four founders, ENQA, ESU, EUA and EURASHE, as well as the social partner organizations represented in the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) and European governments that have decided to support the operation of EQAR and get involved in its overall governance (EQAR, 2009).

<sup>17</sup> (EQAR, 2009).

<sup>18</sup> (Tück, 2009).

The road from pre-Bologna to the present has been a complex, yet necessary journey for the EU and its member-states. It is true that there is still much progress to be made, but so far, the steps that have been taken have seemed to be in the right direction.

### Current Parameters & Indicators

As mentioned above, ENQA's ESG was adopted by all present at the meeting of ministers in Bergen in 2005. This document contains a set of proposed standards and guidelines for quality assurance for higher education institutions in the EU<sup>19</sup>. The drafters chose not to make it too detailed (i.e., including detailed procedures, requirements, etc) as it would then conflict with the principle of protecting university autonomy. The document offers guidelines for policies, procedures and resources that could be implemented towards the QA of higher education at different levels. Included are the following standards and guidelines:

<b>Part 1: European standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance within higher education institutions</b>	<b>Part 2: European standards for the external quality assurance of higher education</b>	<b>Part 3: European standards for external quality assurance agencies</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Policy and procedures for quality assurance</li> <li>• Approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards</li> <li>• Assessment of students</li> <li>• Quality assurance of teaching staff</li> <li>• Learning resources and student support</li> <li>• Information systems</li> <li>• Public information</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use of internal quality assurance procedures</li> <li>• development of external quality assurance processes</li> <li>• Criteria for decisions</li> <li>• Processes fit for purpose</li> <li>• Reporting</li> <li>• Follow-up procedures</li> <li>• Periodic reviews</li> <li>• System-wide analyses</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use of external quality assurance procedures for higher education</li> <li>• Official status</li> <li>• Activities</li> <li>• Resources</li> <li>• Mission statement</li> <li>• Independence</li> <li>• External quality assurance criteria and processes used by the agencies</li> <li>• Accountability procedures</li> </ul>

<sup>19</sup> Some documents, projects and declarations consulted when coming up with the ESG include: the Graz declaration; the ENQA-coordinated pilot project 'Transnational European Evaluation Project' (TEEP); the quality convergence study published by ENQA in March 2005; the 'Code of Good Practice' published in December 2004 by the European Consortium for Accreditation (ECA); ESIB's 'Statement on agreed set of standards, procedures and guidelines at a European level' (April 2004) and 'Statement on peer review of quality assurance and accreditation agencies' (April 2004); EUA's 'QA policy position in the context of the Berlin Communiqué' (April 2004); the EURASHE 'Policy Statement on the Bologna Process' (June 2004), and the "Guidelines for good practice" being implemented by the international network INQAAHE" (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, 2007, p. 5-23).

### **Quality Assurance Today: LAC**

Like the EU, LAC is made up of very different countries; with different cultures, languages, histories, political systems and educational traditions. The traditional role of the higher education institution in LA is to focus on

“...themes of serving social demands, on growth, decentralization, or planning...[now it is concerned with] assessment and accreditation, the use and management of financial contracting,...the charging of tuition and on increases in their own resources, to commercialization and the intervention of international financial organizations” (Didriksson, 2008, p.30).

This could be attributed to the ‘trans-nationalization of higher education’ in the 20<sup>th</sup> century; where, during this time, many, unregulated, distance education programs were being established in the region from such countries such as the United States, Canada, Spain and several others (Didriksson, 2008, p.24). Another factor could be the simultaneous overall growth in the higher education sector—more institutions and more students enrolled. This sudden shift forced the academic world to think about new things, such as collaboration between research and industry, or quality of education.

Even though LAC higher education institutions are not yet at the point of EU institutions—that is, following one set of standards and guidelines of quality assurance—the idea of quality is not foreign to them either. As early as the 1970’s, a number of LA countries had introduced the theme of quality in their education reforms; but, it wasn’t until the 1990’s that the theme of assessment was seriously considered (Lemaitre, 2008, p.287). These efforts began before the Bologna Process and “...follow a similar logic in terms of seeking the harmonization of criteria and the creation of conditions for academic mobility...” (Lemaitre, 2008, p.287). The difference in the progress, however, is most likely due to a lack of legal

agreements on a number of other fronts, both political and economical; therefore, the current, more advanced trend in LAC is the concept of accreditation<sup>20</sup>.

### Accreditation Systems

Because of this lack of trust, many international for-profit organizations come to LAC and open accredited intuitions or provide accredited degree programs. In one sense this is great for the region as it allows for high caliber programs to come to the region without it needing to fully provide all the resources to support such programs. The downfall to this is that, because there is no national jurisdiction over these entities, protecting national interest becomes much more difficult.

As a result, “development began in 1990, and to date there are reasonably consolidated [accreditation] systems in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Costa Rica, Cuba, Mexico, El Salvador, Mexico, Jamaica, and the Dominican Republic”. These systems follow different regimens, particularly in terms of their dependence. The different types of regimens include: public accreditation systems (that are autonomous in regards to the government), governmental, private and dependent on institutions of higher education (Lemaitre, 2008, p.292). The table<sup>21</sup> below maps out some countries that follow one of these types of regimens:

<b>Public Accreditation Systems, but autonomous as regarded to the government</b>	<b>Governmental Accreditation Systems</b>	<b>Private Accreditation Systems</b>	<b>Accreditation Systems that are Dependencies of Institutions of Higher Education</b>
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<sup>20</sup> In the Caribbean, “...initiatives for quality assurance have a clear link to government agencies and the implementation of national Higher Education policies. In the English-speaking countries, Jamaica stands out as one of the oldest mechanisms (with more than 30 years of operation). To this are added Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, and St. Kitts and Nevis, already formally installed, while the Bahamas, Belize, and Surinam have progressed in the formulation or approval of regulatory statutes for Higher Education. In the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, Cuba has a national agency that is part of the state. In the Dominican Republic, quality assurance is the responsibility of a private, non-profit agency, the Dominican Association for Self-Study and Accreditation (ADAAC). Puerto Rico is part of the jurisdiction of one of the regional accrediting agencies of the United States. Martinique, Guadeloupe, and St. Martin each with a single university, and which depend on assessments carried out by the French Ministry of Education, have all issued laws regulating these processes, all in different phases of development” (Lemaitre, 2008, p.295).

<sup>21</sup> Source: (Lemaitre, 2008, p.292)

<i>Colombia, Chile, Ecuador, Peru, and Puerto Rico</i>	<i>Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Mexico, the Dominican Republic, and Uruguay</i>	<i>Chile, Panama, and Puerto Rico</i>	<i>Bolivia, Costa Rica, Panama, Peru, the Dominican Republic, and Uruguay</i>
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The function of these agencies are also diverse and include objectives such as licensing, the assessment of minimum conditions, or authorizations for functioning, thus providing a basic measure for quality control<sup>22</sup> (Lemaitre, 2008, p.293).

Although accreditation and QA systems do not exist<sup>23</sup>, or are not very active, in many countries, there are some countries that are doing a lot in this area.

### CRES 2008

The year 2008 marked a milestone in the development of QA in higher education in the LAC region. At the Regional Conference for Higher Education (CREES), delegates began a dialog about what to do regarding these current and critical challenges. One comment made related to the urgency of this issue was that the challenges they face are of such magnitude that if not met in a timely and efficacious manner, they will deepen the differences, inequalities, and contradictions that currently impede the growth of an equitable, just, sustainable, and democratic LAC for the great majority of countries in the region (CRES, 2008, p.2). This sense of urgency and importance lead to the signing of The Declaration of the Regional Conference on Higher Education in LAC; which makes recommendations and provides guidelines for the following areas: context, higher education as a human right and

<sup>22</sup> Examples of these cases are found in Chile, Colombia, Argentina, and in various governmental entities in different countries. Others focus their activities on the accreditation of courses or programs, which may be voluntary (as in the cases of Costa Rica, Chile, Colombia, or Paraguay) or obligatory (selected courses in Argentina, Chile, Colombia, and Cuba). The case of Colombia is particularly interesting because there the focus is on the accreditation of high quality; that is, it is centered on the identification of outstanding courses which may thus serve as examples for others in the country. Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, El Salvador and the Dominican Republic are also working on institutional accreditation” (Lemaitre, 2008, p.293).

<sup>23</sup> Other advancements in this area QA include the concept of accrediting accreditation bodies such as the Central America there is the Central American Accreditation Council (CCA); and that of mutual recognition of accreditation processes and the academic validity of degrees exist such as the System of Accreditation of University Courses for Regional Recognition of the Academic Quality of Respective Degrees (ARCU-SUR) (Lemaitre, 2008, p.292).

social public good, coverage and educational and institutional models, social and human values of higher education, scientific, humanistic, and artistic education and comprehensive sustainable development, academic networks, emigration of highly skilled persons, and regional integration and internationalization.

Outside of the national accreditation and QA agencies, there are regional bodies that are also working to advance QA in higher education. They include: the Ibero-American Network of Accreditation Agencies (RIACES), the Caribbean Area Network for Quality Assurance in Tertiary Education (CANQATE), UNESCO International Institute of Higher Education for Latin America and the Caribbean (IESALC), the Central American Accreditation Council (CCA)<sup>24</sup>, and the Central American Superior Council for Higher Education (CSUCA). Some major initiatives taken up by these institutions include: holding conferences, workshops and discussion forums; conducting research and publishing reports about topics related to QA and accreditation; facilitating the establishment of multi-national agreements in higher education; and working as regional networks, opening up the lines of communication between various stakeholders from many different countries. Although QA in LAC is not as well-established today as it is in the EU, there are still some advanced cases of QA at the national level that are worth noting: Argentina, *National Commission for University Evaluation and Accreditation (CONEAU)*<sup>25</sup>; Brazil, *Higher Education Institution Document Tracking System (SAPIENS)*<sup>26</sup>; Colombia, *National Council of Accreditation (CAN)*<sup>27</sup>; and Mexico, *Council for Higher Education Accreditation (COPEAES)*<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> CCA Documents of Interest: Actual documents with outlines for processes/procedures, [www.cca.ucr.ac.cr/solicitud\\_documentos.html](http://www.cca.ucr.ac.cr/solicitud_documentos.html)

<sup>25</sup> CONEAU Documents of Interest: Indicators for External Evaluations ([www.coneau.gov.ar/archivos/486.pdf](http://www.coneau.gov.ar/archivos/486.pdf)) & Guidelines for Self-evaluations ([www.coneau.gov.ar/index.php?item=23&apps=32&idioma=en](http://www.coneau.gov.ar/index.php?item=23&apps=32&idioma=en))

<sup>26</sup> SAPINES Documents of Interest: ????  
([portal.mec.gov.br/sesu/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=490&Itemid=293](http://portal.mec.gov.br/sesu/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=490&Itemid=293))

<sup>27</sup> CAN Documents of Interest: Indicators for Self-Evaluations ([www.cna.gov.co/cont/acr\\_alt\\_cal/index.htm](http://www.cna.gov.co/cont/acr_alt_cal/index.htm))

<sup>28</sup> COPEAS Documents of Interest: Guidelines, Procedures and Methods for the accreditation of accrediting bodies ([www.copaes.org.mx/documentos/documentos.htm](http://www.copaes.org.mx/documentos/documentos.htm))

The QA situation in LAC is developing and, with the recent activities of regional networks, will prove to be important for the future development of this region—academically, politically and economically. Cooperation on the academic front; establishing relationships between different institutions, countries and the academic-industrial sectors; and putting forth steady and continuous efforts will surely be the best way for QA to be incorporated into the political agendas as well as within the institutional culture itself. Even though many countries have agreed with this idea, it is important to note that there is also a risk when investing in the harmonization of systems in LAC. Because the foundation of this system begins at the institutional-national level, other factors affect the outcomes of QA systems. Without proper legal, administrative, financial, or human resources, such systems can not be successful, nor effective (Lemaitre, 2008, p.300). The risk of this is that national interests are not protected and this could lead to brain-drain, establishment of diploma mills, and a whole host of other problems. On the other hand, the development of a LAC regional network is dependent on the ability of credible, fully-supported national level agencies to come together and form such a network. Because many countries in this region currently lack the support needed to establish a fully-functioning QA or accreditation system, there is the possibility of creating a network that is ultimately destined to fail—or that only certain countries will dominate, again imposing ‘outside’ views which could potentially harm national interests.

### **Harmonization: Reality or Fantasy?**

It is unarguable that the current trend is moving towards regional QA networks, as the forces of globalization are increasing the mobility of students and the competitiveness of institutions, among other things. Whether this is the correct path or not will not be discussed;

rather, I'd like to discuss what must be considered in order for true harmonization to exist, in any part of the world.

First, there needs to be a decision made by someone or some institution that there is a need for establishing a regional network. This should be done through a thorough needs-analysis which takes into consideration the pros and cons of such an action. Among other things, this analysis should include a clear understanding as to the purpose of establishing such a network and the availability of resources (human and financial resources). Next, once members have committed to the network, a clear mission and vision must be developed by the members, together, in order for each member to feel ownership of the initiative. Without this, it will be difficult to sustain such activities in the long-term. After many open, honest and realistic discussions, there needs to be an agreement on a set of standards and guidelines members will implement in their national context. Like the ESG, it should be a set of standards outlining *what* should happen, not *how*. With the ability to choose their own, unique implementation of these standards and guidelines, national interests can be protected and there is a greater chance of member compliance to them; thus, increasing the likelihood of long-term sustainability. After implementation, since this will be a continuous process, there needs to be regular meetings for members of the network to share best practices, discuss their experiences and make adjustments to network activities, processes, etc. When the network reaches the point of implementation, it means that a certain level of trust has been established between members and also other stakeholders. Again, for long-term sustainability of the network, the standards and other activities, there must be trust in the network from all stakeholders. Trust and elimination of fear—fear of losing one's culture, identity and autonomy. All in all, it seems like the most common challenges in establishing a regional QA network come from national politics, national prejudices, language problems, funding and fear.

## Conclusions

Like in LAC, the EU used to use different models of QA which resulted from different concepts and definitions of quality. Today, with the creation of the ESG in Europe, there is an agreement to move towards one common model and LAC also seems to be moving in that direction. The overall discussion about QA involves two main pieces: internal and external QA. These two, "...internal quality assurance and external quality assessment are two sides of one and the same coin. If we strive to enhance quality across borders we must work both on the quality culture within higher education institutions and on developing external quality assurance" (Wahlers, 2007, p.14). This can happen through organized, participatory academic reforms which include all stakeholders' inputs and interests. This seems to be happening in LAC as, with the Declaration of Panama, came the agreement that there should be serious efforts made in constructing a Latina America and Caribbean Space for Higher Education (ENLACES). Here, "joint quality assurance procedures and mutual recognition are influenced and determined by the object of recognition, the rationale of recognition, and the tools and methods available for recognition" (Wahlers, 2007, p.39); therefore, after coming up with clear definitions of concepts, expectations and action items, this could become a reality for the region.

Since the EU is further along in the process of moving towards one common approach to QA in the region, some initiatives have begun to begin a dialog between the two regions; to see what can be learned from one another. One example is the TUNING (Latin American) project, which was also implemented in the EU. Its purpose is for institutions in the region to work together to 'tune' their current processes, procedures and systems in order to facilitate a more harmonized approach to higher education—one area being that of quality. Another example is that of Spain's QA agency (ANECA) and RIACES. The project is called Quality

Assurance Systems of Accreditation Agencies (CINTAS). The purpose of this project is to support QA initiatives, along with those of accreditation. It is meant to develop the bonds between different systems and, in a way, acts as one more link between the EU and LAC<sup>29</sup>.

In the EU, and most likely in other parts of the world, the

"modern higher education systems and institutions are to a large degree products of the nation-state and have been instruments of the national states to homogenise their populations, create citizenship and nationalistic loyalties and to build their national elites. Education is linked to powerful political sentiments in the field of national culture, language, social emancipation, etc.,..." (Damme, 2003, p.134).

Therefore, it is understandable and expected that countries with such long national histories can't, and don't want to, change overnight and subscribe to a 'regional allegiance'. Only through dialog, the development of trust between stakeholders, and with lots of time can the establishment of regional QA networks every truly be sustainable and achievable.

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<sup>29</sup>CINTAS Documents of Interest: Guide to Internal Quality Assurance of Evaluation and Accreditation Agencies ([www.riaces.net/docs/Anexo\\_II\\_CINTAS\\_Guia\\_Aseguramiento\\_Calidad\\_Agencias\\_REV.pdf](http://www.riaces.net/docs/Anexo_II_CINTAS_Guia_Aseguramiento_Calidad_Agencias_REV.pdf)) & Manual for Self-Evaluation of Evaluation and Accreditation Agencies in Higher Education ([www.riaces.net/docs/Anexo\\_I\\_Manual\\_riaces\\_completo.pdf](http://www.riaces.net/docs/Anexo_I_Manual_riaces_completo.pdf))

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