A HIGHER EDUCATION QUALITY ASSURANCE MODEL FOR SMALL STATES: THE MALDIVES CASE STUDY

Abdul Hannan Waheed

BEd. (Al-Azhar, Egypt), MA (Sussex, UK)

Principal Supervisor: Professor Hitendra Pillay

Associate Supervisor: Associate Professor Peter Hudson

A thesis submitted to fulfil the requirements of

Doctor of Philosophy

Office of Education Research

Faculty of Education

Queensland University of Technology

2013

Abstract

This study investigated what constitutes the key elements and attributes of an effective Quality Assurance (QA) system in Higher Education (HE) for Small States. Currently, there is a lack of conceptual and operational rigour in supporting a sustainable quality assurance system in higher education for Small States (Stella, 2010). Tackling this problem requires a system-wide holistic approach situated within a broader national and international system of QA in higher education with a view to capture the implications for Small States. To investigate this, the research reported here drew on a systems theory (Pidwimy, 2006b) to investigate the systematic characteristics of quality assurance in higher education. The aim was to understand the underlying principles, as well as the emerging themes in quality assurance systems in higher education. The study could serve as a useful reference for policy makers, practitioners and professionals alike.

The research was a qualitative case study based on the constructionist paradigm and includes the use of document analysis and interviews for data collection. It drew upon a case study in the Maldives, to explore possible linkages, similarities, challenges, issues and quality assurance options that emerged and are relevant to that of Small State contexts. Interviews and document analysis were used to collect data from 16 participants from four stakeholder groups in the Maldives. The data were analysed using a content analysis approach which involved an inductive process of breaking down data into segments that were then categorised, ordered and examined for connections, patterns and propositions.

Five findings were derived from the study and may be regarded as critical aspects of a higher education quality assurance system, especially, with respect to Small States. First, the need for legislation within a regulatory framework emerged as paramount for the establishment of HE QA system. Legislation offers a clear description of the roles and responsibilities for the whole system. Second, a QA agency which is strong and independent was marked as a key feature of a HE QA agency. A strong QA agency in line with principals of a one-tier system facilitates the independence of the agency. Third, issues related to the regulatory board of a HE QA agency, appears to influence the overall organisational effectiveness of the

agency. These issues include, equal representation of board membership and conflict of interest. Fourth, a lack of minimum standards and guidelines is a major hurdle Small States are facing in strengthening HE QA systems. Fifth, the complete circle of QA services starting with registration of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and moving on to accreditation of both the institution and programmes for a certain period of time, which is then followed by academic audit, is rare in many systems, especially Small States. Intricate details of these findings as well as the data analysis from which the findings were drawn from are explained in the body of the thesis (Chapters Four and Five).

There is recognition that an ideal procedure for a holistic QA system for higher education is critical. The findings show that Small States have limitations such as slow speed in doing things, human resource capacity and funding constraints. The study concludes by making suggestions for key considerations in an optimum QA model for Small States.

Keywords

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

Table of Contents

List of Figures

List of Tables

List of Abbreviations

APACC	Asia Pacific Accreditation and Certification Commission
AUQA	Australian Universities Quality Agency
CEPES	Centre Européen pour l'Enseignement Supérieur
CIS	College of Islamic Studies
COL	Commonwealth of Learning
ECTS	European Credit Transfer System
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
EQA	External Quality Assurance
EQF	European Qualifications Framework
ESG	Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GGP	Guidelines of Good Practice
HE	Higher Education
HEIs	Higher Education Institutions
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
INQAAHE	International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education
MAB	Maldives Accreditation Board
MCHE	Maldives College of Higher Education
MNQF	Maldives National Qualifications Framework
MQA	Maldives Qualifications Agency
NAAC	National Assessment and Accreditation Council

NQF	National Qualifications Framework
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
QA	Quality Assurance
QUT	Queensland University of Technology
TEC	Tertiary Education Commission
TEQSA	Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency
THES	Times Higher Education Supplement
TQF	Transnational Qualifications Framework
TQM	Total Quality Management
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education Training
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Science and Cultural Organisation
USP	University of South Pacific
UWI	University of the West Indies

Statement of Original Authorship

The work contained in this thesis has not been previously submitted to meet requirements for an award at this or any other higher education institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made.

QUT Verified
Signature

Signature:

Date: 13 December, 2013

Acknowledgement

Foremost, I would like to express my sincere acknowledgement and gratitude to my Principal Supervisor Professor Hitendra Pillay for his continuous support, for his patience, motivation, enthusiasm and immense knowledge. His guidance helped me through my research milestones and the writing of this thesis. I could not have asked for a better Principal Supervisor and mentor.

I would also like to thank my Associate Supervisor Associate Professor Peter Hudson for his encouragement, insightful comments, and very handy academic writing tips he gave throughout my PhD journey.

My sincere thanks also goes to the Australian government for awarding me the Australian Leadership Award that has helped to fund my PhD study at QUT and for the leadership development programme, leadership seminars, workshops, internships and coaching sessions.

I would also like to thank the Centre for Learning Innovation (CLI), Faculty of Education, QUT for their academic writing support. Similarly, I thank the QUT International Student Services (ISS) for the language and support provided. I would like to mention and thank Kerrie Petersen and Karyn Gonano from the Academic Language and Learning Service for their support with the use of English language.

Last but not least, I would like to acknowledge and thank my family, friends and colleagues who have supported and encouraged me. I would like to thank my parents: Mohamed Waheed and Fathimath Abdulla Didi for supporting me continually and trusting in my ability to excel.

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter contextualises the proposed research. Section 1.1 outlines the background and Section 1.2 discusses the context of the study. Section 1.3 discusses the significance of the research presenting the case for this study and the purposes. The research design is outlined in section 1.4. Finally, section 1.5 outlines the structure of the remaining chapters of the thesis.

1.1 BACKGROUND

The technological and information revolution has transformed the global economic and social environment, including the provision of higher education (HE) services. Developed nations are leading, and benefiting from these transformations. With limited resources to invest in their higher education sector, Small States, on the other hand, have difficulty capitalising on the benefits of the technological and information revolution and are left trailing behind. Tapping into this higher education transformation and adopting a knowledge-based economy is critical for Small States. Although there may be sub-sectors related to higher education such as VET, this study is focussing on the higher education provided in universities, colleges and other higher education institutions.

"Small States" are defined as countries with a population of 1.5 million or less (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2011; World Bank & Commonwealth Secretariat, 2000). According to current figures, there are 49 independent states with populations of this size (Commonwealth Consultative Group, 1997). The challenges inherent in the technological and information revolution have resulted in an exponential increase in higher education demand and providers. The sudden increase in demand warrants mechanisms to regulate and monitor the quality generally and, in particular, to meet the demands of Small States, whose needs are very different. Small States are often at the receiving end of the global higher education export market, as they have limited resources for investing in their own higher education sector.

A situational analysis of quality assurance (QA) in Small States carried out by the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) suggests that not all Small States have operational Quality Assurance

systems in place (Stella, 2010). Lacking a QA system that is "fit for purpose" (see Section 2.2.1) may make Small States vulnerable in the face of growing quality challenges in today's borderless higher education. In addition to local challenges, such as increasing access through encouraging private for-profit higher education providers (Lewis, 2009), there are quality challenges related to internationalisation of higher education. These challenges include difficulty in dealing with cross-border higher education, institutional cooperation, transnational university networks, and virtual delivery of higher education (Van Damme, 2001). These challenges are discussed in more detail in Chapter Two.

Contemporary thinking appears to support a regulated quality assurance system to ensure that students receive the best possible education, and to maintain employers' and public confidence in the quality of the education provided (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008). Those Small States that have some form of a QA system for higher education seem to have adopted models from developed countries. This raises concerns about the 'fit' of those quality assurance guidelines to the local, social and economic environments of the Small States. As a consequence, this research analysed what constitutes a QA system 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 was used as the context for the study.

This study was guided by a conceptual framework which is situated within a "systems theory" approach (Bertalanffy, 1968). One of the well-known basic assumptions regarding general systems theory is that all systems have some characteristics in common (Skyttner, 2001). Structural and process elements, and relationships in QA systems have been found to be consistent in many countries such as Australia, New Zealand, the USA and other countries (Houston & Maniku, 2005). Houston and Maniku argue that this approach can help to work through the complex nature with multiple variables and relationships of QA in higher education.

1.1.1 Peculiarities of Small States.

Small States share common challenges and peculiarities mainly because of their unique contexts (Stella, 2010). These challenges and vulnerabilities vary from remoteness and/or isolation, susceptibility to natural disasters and environmental challenges, limited diversification and (small) economic activities, and limited

capacity to respond to the challenges and opportunities of globalisation due to size and capacity of the population (human resources). This size factor has implications for other development indicators. Many Small States are small in terms of standard indicators such as 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).

Thus, population size, land area, and GDP present logistical difficulties for Small States in developing and implementing sound QA systems for higher education. Implementation of HE QA systems in Small States is characterised by its slow pace, lack of broader QA functions, excessive government influence, and a lack of human resources. Stella (2010) emphasises that these common challenges require a different way of thinking to determine effective quality assurance processes in higher education for Small States. This research explored and discussed the options for Small States within the localised context, through the literature review and subsequently an empirical study. The options may not be the same as those required for bigger and wealthier nations where consistent global trends exist and socio-economic situations are very different. While developed nations adopt QA options inspired by international standards of the quality of teaching and research based on international benchmarks, Small States require a greater focus on their local contexts.

Not all of the Small States have the same capacity to develop and implement quality assurance in higher education. Stella (2010) claims that Small States fall into three categories: (1) States that already have some core capacity in quality assurance in higher education; (2) States that started making some progress in establishing qualifications framework authorities or QA bodies; and (3) States that rely on regional structures such as regional universities.

1.2 CONTEXT OF THE MALDIVES AS A SMALL STATE

The Maldives, the site of the empirical part of this study, is one of two Small States in South Asia as listed in the United Nations (UN) report of the global conference on the sustainable development of small island developing nations (United Nations, 1994). The UN report recognise that the Maldives faces many of the vulnerabilities common to other Small States and concurs with the discussion noted above on challenges Small States face. In the case of the Maldives, these

vulnerabilities are compounded because it is a small *island* state which requires additional and more expansive solutions to overcome its isolation/ remoteness. Small island States are particularly vulnerable to natural and environmental disasters and have limited capacity to respond to and recover from such disasters (United Nations, 1994).

The Maldives has the typical demographic and geographic landscape of a small state. It consists of 1190 islands scattered in the Indian Ocean over an 850 km north-south, fairly narrow stretch, with a land mass of just 300 km^2 (United Nations Environment Programme, 2005). Global warming and sea level rise have become major environmental concerns due to the fact that the islands are small and low-lying (Maldives: Country report, 2009). The population of the Maldives surpassed 300,000 in 2006 and if the current growth rate of 1.69 percent continues the population is estimated to double in 40 years (Ministry of Planning and National Development, 2008). Over half of the 199 inhabited islands have a population of less than 1000 people which undermines the benefits of economies of scale. The uneven distribution of population poses many challenges for development, including the high unit cost of providing social and economic services and infrastructure (Permanent Mission of the Republic of Maldives to the United Nations Office at Geneva, 2006).

The economy of the Maldives is dependent on natural resources. Tourism and fisheries sectors dominate the economy. The tourism sector has contributed around 60% of GDP since 1995 (Special Programme on the Least Developed Countries and Land-locked and Island Developed Countries of UNCTAD, 2003). Issues related to smallness and vulnerability arise from the fact that the economy of the Maldives as a Small island State, to a large extent, is shaped by forces outside its control (Briguglio, 1995). Though the Maldives experienced rapid economic growth in recent years thanks to a dynamic tourism sector, the susceptibility of the economy to factors beyond its control was augmented in the wake of the devastation caused by the 2004 tsunami and the decline in tourism following the September 11 terrorist attacks in the USA (Maldives Monetary Authority, 2010). Small States such as the Maldives, often appear relatively prosperous on the basis of per capita income criteria, but in reality are generally among the most economically vulnerable and structurally handicapped countries (Special Programme on the Least Developed Countries and Land-locked and Island Developed Countries of UNCTAD, 2003).

Such vulnerability underscores the need for diversifying the economic base (Maldives Monetary Authority, 2010). However, options for the Maldives to diversify its economy are limited by a small population, the relative geographic isolation of the country, the lack of significant natural resources, and a small manufacturing base (United Nations Environment Programme, 2009).

As the Maldives attempts to transform itself to a knowledge society and diversify its economy, higher education becomes a key sector to achieving this objective. Also, the population growth adds impetus to the rising demand for higher education. Secondary education enrolments have risen nearly threefold in the past 10 years (Maldives: Country report, 2009) partly due to the escalating skill requirements by the industry and job market. The number of students progressing to higher education has also increased significantly (Ministry of Planning and National Development, 2007). The response of the government of the Maldives to this demand for higher education is discussed in the next section.

The proposed study will focus on the pragmatics of organisational and institutional aspects of QA in HE. However, the study acknowledges that institutions are influenced by the socio-cultural aspects within which it operated. The proposed study adopts its conceptual framework from international contemporary research in quality assurance in HE and intends to keep the focus on the institutional and organisational principles underpinning the QA in HE debate. Therefore, the investigation of socio-cultural factors affecting the conceptualisation of and implementation of a HE QA system is not the focus of this study.

1.2.1 Higher education transition in the Maldives.

The higher education sector in the Maldives is characterised by its small size. In the Maldives, higher education encompasses all post secondary education, including technical and vocational education (Ministry of Planning and National Development, 2007). Only 45 local higher education providers were in operation in 2010 (Maldives Qualifications Authority, 2010a), but recently, the scope and reach of these institutions has increased rapidly (Maldives: Country report, 2009). The major higher education institutions are comprised of two government supported institutions: the Maldives National University (MNU), and the College of Islamic Studies (CIS). Five private colleges are also in operation: Clique College, Cyryx College, Mandhu College, Villa College and MAPS College. Apart from MNU and

private colleges, the small institutes only provide vocational education level (Certificate 1 to Certificate 4) courses. Although off-shore foreign providers are not currently operating in the Maldives, Maldivian students are exposed to these providers operating in neighbouring counties such as Sri Lanka and Malaysia where an increasing number of Maldivian students are pursuing higher education studies (Bray & Adam, 2001; Chauhan, 2008; Latheef, 1998; Maldives: Country report, 2009). It is worth noting that some local providers have mutually beneficial agreements to offer programs of foreign institutions (Cyryx College, 2010; Mandhu College, 2009; Villa College, 2010b). In addition to traditional higher education, a structure for technical and vocational training was introduced in 2006 with the creation of a Technical and Vocational Education Training (TVET) division under the Ministry of Human resources, Youth and Sports (Technical and Vocational Education Training Division, 2010) and establishment of the Maldives Polytechnic for technical and vocational education in 2009 (Maldives: Country report, 2009).

In the Maldives, the private sector is now more interested in higher education than it has been in previous years. This development could have been triggered by the relatively large number of higher secondary school leavers who are seeking higher education qualifications. In addition to the public institutions, some of the private institutions are also looking to reach out to this emerging market. Indeed, as mentioned above, five private institutes have been upgraded to colleges since 2009. It is not only the status of the institutions that has been changed, but also the student numbers and the variety of the academic programs offered. Though enrolment figures are not available for all private institutions, the Villa College reported student enrolment from just 7 at its inception in 2007 to over 1000 students in 2010 (Villa College, 2010b). Until recently, many private providers were involved in only delivering short courses in computer literacy and English language for adults and preparing youth and adults for professional examinations (Maldives: Country report, 2009). However, private providers now offer long term courses in many disciplines such as education, health sciences, engineering, computing, business, hospitality management and tourism studies, marine studies and water sports (Villa College, 2010a).

The rapid expansion of higher education provision in the Maldives has led to the establishment of a quality assurance system for higher education in 2000

(Waheed, 2005). To monitor and manage these higher education institutions, the Maldives Accreditation Board (MAB), a non-statutory government body, was created in August 2001 by a Presidential decree. However, in recognition for the need of a renewed focus on quality assurance in higher education, MAB was re-named the Maldives Qualifications Authority (MQA) on 17 May, 2010 (Maldives Qualifications Authority, 2010d). Therefore, MQA has become the sole quality assurance agency for all higher education services in the country. However, it remains to be seen how independent the MQA is after this recent re-structuring, even though transforming the national quality assurance body to an independent body has been a government priority (Maldives: Country report, 2009).

While the mandate of the MQA is to assure the quality of post-secondary qualifications awarded in testimony of educational attainments, the Maldives National Qualifications Framework (MNQF) has been in place since 2001 to support the functions of the MAB first and now the MQA (Maldives Qualifications Authority, 2010d). MNQF was revised in 2009 so that quality and content were given precedence over duration and hours. (Maldives Qualifications Authority, 2010c). As the sole quality assurance body in the Maldives, MQA is mandated to enforce the MNQF.

The increased need for a national quality assurance body emerged from the "Seventh National Development Plan 2006 – 2010" where it was recognised that the country needs "to develop and strengthen mechanisms to assure the quality of HE provision in order to ensure that qualifications are recognised by industry as well as the national and international community" (Ministry of Planning and National Development, 2007, p. 135). The Seventh National Development Plan 2006 – 2010, recognises the importance of positioning the MQA (then MAB) "to play a stronger monitoring role across the whole spectrum of postsecondary and technical and vocational education through capacity building and strengthening its links with the industry, the education service providers and the accreditation authorities worldwide" (Maldives: Country report, 2009, p. 11; Ministry of Planning and National Development, 2007, p. 135). This is an indication that there is a realisation on a national level that higher education quality assurance is an area that needs to be developed and strengthened. This study acknowledges that the MQA's role is to assure quality of post-secondary education in general. However, as mentioned in the

beginning of this chapter, the particular focus of this research is on higher education, which is the education provided in institutes, colleges and universities.

Until 2011, the Maldives like many other Small States had no university, but, as the country moves towards becoming a knowledge economy, it recognises the need for advancing its education system and has upgraded Maldives College of Higher Education (MCHE) to the Maldives National University. The university was inaugurated on 15 February 2011 (Ministry of Education, 2011). As MQA is mandated to assure quality of higher education in all HE institutions including MNU, this development, yet again, reinforces the need to strength the role of MQA to meet this continuous growth in HE. Naidoo (2008) stresses that in the context of the knowledge economy, higher education institutions like the universities are positioned as one of the most important powerhouses for development.

1.2.2 Quality Assurance in higher education.

Systemic quality assurance and improvement of the services of higher education institutions is a core component of the global higher education reform agenda (Bornmann, Mittag, & Daniel, 2006). Bornmann et al. emphasise that this was evident in the "communiqué of the conference of ministers responsible for higher education in Berlin on 19 September 2003" (p. 687), when they declared quality assurance to be central to establishing a European Higher Education Area. Declarations like these underscore the importance of quality assurance in higher education.

The majority of the quality assurance initiatives in the literature are from large developed countries thus there are limited initiatives targeted at enhancing QA of higher education in Small States (Houston & Maniku, 2005). One example that did consider the peculiarities of Small States is the Commonwealth of Learning's Transnational Qualifications Framework (TQF) for the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth. They developed quality assurance guidelines based on other international benchmarks such as INQAAHE's Guidelines for Good Practice for Quality Assurance, the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education's Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the Higher Education Area, and UNESCO's Guidelines on Quality Assurance in Higher Education (Allgoo et al., 2010). It is important to note that more than 30 Small States of the Commonwealth have participated in developing the TQF which acts as a translation

tool for modules/ units and qualifications between countries and also discourages 'bogus' providers which are active in trying to sell fake qualifications in Small States (Commonwealth of Learning, 2010).

Internationally, a number of models for ensuring quality in Higher Education already exist and various approaches are used. Many of these initiatives target quality management of higher education institutions like the universities through initiatives such as internal (self-assessment) and external assessment of the institutions undertaken by an external panel of reviewers; accreditation and certification systems of programs and service providers; and different models of Total Quality Management (Calvo-Mora, Leal, & Roldán, 2006).

As noted by Daniel, Kanwar, and Clarke-Okah (2006), QA in higher education literature is diverse and vague. It tends to focus mainly on developed economies. This lack of clarity confounds the development of any higher education QA system for Small States particularly in developing economies. While it is acknowledged that the international research in higher education QA provides a sound basis for developing QA models for Small States in developing economies, the research does not take into consideration the peculiarities specific to these Small States. Therefore a review of the assumptions, rationale and procedures underlying the various models in the literature is required. Investigation into the applicability of such models to the higher education sector in the Small States, in order to develop a model that addresses the needs of these countries is also required.

A detailed examination of current literature on QA definitions, standards, underlying principles, and major concepts as well as drivers in QA is presented in Chapter Two. Though many researchers highlighted that there is a lack of information on Small States quality assurance developments (Stella, 2010), an overall picture of Small States' QA systems, by examining some selected countries, are presented in the literature review. This study is situated within a conceptual framework which is based on the principles of systems theory. The framework identifies key systemic elements of QA in higher education, such as legislative framework, regulatory mechanisms, national versus international standards, and service delivery as the key components.

1.3 SIGNIFICANCE, SCOPE AND DEFINITIONS

Current debates in higher education quality assurance focus mainly on larger or more advanced systems and on separate elements of the systems. Most of the current QA research focuses on national QA systems, discusses either the Australian system (Anderson, 2006; Blackmur, 2008b; Harman, 1994; Vidovich, 2002) or the American and European systems (Amaral & Magalhães, 2004; Cooper, 2007; Gänzle, Meister, & King, 2009; Gordon, 1999; Gvaramadze, 2008; Haakstad, 2001; Hoecht, 2006; Nilsson & Wahlen, 2000; Rhoades & Sporn, 2002; Stanley & Patrick, 1998). Research, which addresses higher education QA in a holistic way, is rare. Most research focuses on specific aspects of QA such as, institutional audits, and guidelines of quality assurance networks (Blackmur, 2007, 2008a) as well as been "fit for purpose", which relates quality to the purpose of a product or service. QA (J. Williams & Cappuccini-Ansfield, 2007; Woodhouse, 2006). As a consequence, Ehlers (2009) claims that the current debate in quality assurance of higher education does not adequately lead to developing QA measures. Another observation is that researchers appear to be measuring the quality of higher education against a global agenda, including global higher education rankings (Pillay & Kimber, 2009). Recognising this anomaly in current debate on HE QA, this research seeks to develop an alternative model for higher education QA for Small States. This is an alternative to seeking ranking on a global system that may have limited value to the local HE context.

Another significance of this research is that it takes a systems approach rather than focusing simply on one or another aspect of QA in HE. This research acknowledges the changing nature of the higher education landscape and the need to develop a holistic higher education QA model for Small States.

Finally, this research intended to provide a useful and relevant QA model for higher education for Small States. It provided an analysis of focus areas in higher education QA and the key elements and their relationships in making a QA system effective. The three main elements of higher education QA emphasised in this study, which constitute the model for Small States, are: (1) regulatory framework, (2) minimum quality standards, and (3) service delivery. This model will serve as a useful reference of QA in higher education for policy makers, practitioners and professionals alike.

1.3.1 Purposes.

Globally as the higher education sector becomes more diverse, research into the higher education sector is rapidly expanding. As awareness of the importance of higher education grows, this research aimed to develop a higher education quality assurance model for Small States. Contemporary researchers working in the area recognise the importance of a sound HE system for economic prosperity; its role for social equity and social mobility; and its effect on social cohesion and social integration (Brennan & Teichler, 2008). This concurs with the international consensus that the quality of a nation's higher education system will be one of the key determinants of its economic and social progress (Bradley et al., 2008; Stensaker, 2008). In agreement with Stensaker (2008), the proposed study recognises the importance of the higher education sector as a tool for the development of a nation and emphasises the importance of quality assurance within a rapidly changing higher education landscape.

Against this background, this study explored in-depth understanding into QA in higher education and the reoccurring themes. It investigated what constitute 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 then analysed with a comparative perspective against global principles, concepts, and models in QA in higher education. The investigation focused the analysis on the applicability to the Small States' context.

1.3.1.1 Research Problem.

The main research problem investigated by this study was the gap in conceptual and operational rigour to support a sustainable QA system for Small States particularly where, in recent years, transition of post secondary colleges to university status is increasingly becoming a feature of knowledge enterprise. Managing quality in a market-driven and dynamic environment cannot, however, be tackled only by addressing a single aspect of a QA system but requires a system-wide approach. Thus, the research problem in this study was 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 do not sufficiently provide the functionality to support national needs and aspirations.

1.3.1.2 Research Question.

The central question posed by this study was: What constitutes the key elements and regulatory mechanisms of an effective QA system in higher education for Small States?

Research sub-questions.

To support the investigation, the following sub-questions were proposed.

SQ1: What are the elements and the underpinning attributes of an effective higher education QA system?

SQ2: What are the key regulatory and supporting management and governance issues of a robust higher education QA mechanism generally and, in particular, for Small States?

SQ3: What are the operational drivers and how may they affect a higher education QA system?

1.4 RESEARCH DESIGN

Using the Maldives as a case study, this research adopted a qualitative approach to investigate the problem. The data collection was through both document analysis and interviews with key stakeholders in the Maldivian QA system in higher education. The key stakeholders were: (1) Ministry of Education; (2) eight leading higher education institutions, (3) The Maldives HE QA agency (MQA); and (4) five industry associations. Data analysis was carried out subsequently using the NVivo software as a tool to break down the data segments into themes and sub-themes

The research questions were addressed through an in-depth, qualitative investigation of each of the key higher education QA elements and processes that emerged from the literature review, and were considered appropriate for Small States such as the Maldives. A characteristic of qualitative research is that it is exploratory in nature and open-ended, which is one of the defining characteristics of this study.

The qualitative research design has benefits and advantages over other research methodologies (Merriam, 1998), which are encouraging for this particular study. These include in-depth and comprehensive examination of phenomena within a

bounded context (Flick, 2006; Key, 1997; Merriam, 1998). It allows the use of value judgement and subjective information from the participant and researcher's observation to describe the context . Qualitative research seeks a wide understanding of an entire situation, which will be useful in understanding QA in HE for Small States. It allows examination of complex questions that can be better investigated with qualitative methods. In addition, qualitative research helps to explore new areas of research and to build new theories. The qualitative characteristics (Flick, 2006; Key, 1997; Merriam, 1998) of this study were revealed in a number of ways. First, a model of QA in higher education emerged after the data collection and data analysis. Second, the information provided by individuals who were interviewed formed an important part of the data used in the modelling process. These interviews were in-depth in nature. Third, the researcher has an understanding of the subject area due to previous involvement and experience in the area of QA in HE. The role of the researcher and possible limitations are discussed in more detail in Section 3.6 of Chapter Three. Fourth, this research was exploratory in nature as it moved towards developing a higher education QA model for Small States.

The study examined the landscape of the higher education QA system in the Maldives as a case study of the research. The case was bounded by the context of the Maldives to examine the complex nature of QA in higher education within a Small State context. Hakim (1987) argues that case studies are probably the most flexible of all research designs. The phenomenon or the case can be seen as a "thing, a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries" (Merriam, 1998, p. 28). Perhaps the most notable advantage of case study design is that it allows two or more methods of data collection (Hakim, 1987). Merriam concludes that "the single most defining characteristic of case study research lies in delimiting the object of study, the case" (p. 27) which in this case is a HE QA model for the Maldives which is serving as a proxy for Small States .

Merriam (1998) explains that qualitative case studies are often framed with concepts, models, and theories. Likewise, this study adopted a similar approach in this research, which was developing a model for higher education QA for Small States based around the system theory. Also, by assessing the boundedness of the research topic, it can be assumed that the research phenomena of this study was bounded enough (one small state) to qualify for a case study. Merriam suggests that

if there is an end actually or theoretically to the number of people who would be interviewed or to observations that could be conducted, then the phenomena is bounded enough as a case. This research had a clear idea of the key stakeholders in the Maldives higher education QA system, who were interviewed for data collection. Thus the bounded nature of the case was tightly managed.

This research was a holistic single case design (Yin, 2009a). The rationale for using a single case was that the case is *representative* or *typical* of many Small States – if not all. Yin (2009b) states the objective of such a case is to capture circumstances and conditions of an everyday or commonplace situation. This research which investigated Small States QA systems in higher education suggests that the Maldives was a typical case among many other cases, and the lessons learned from these cases are assumed to be representative of other such cases. The context of this study was set in the Maldives, which is representative of Small States. Therefore, the case of the Maldives can be assumed to represent the many issues and challenges that Small States face in higher education QA.

The overall intent of the case study within this research was interpretive. In this context, this research used case study to investigate higher education QA systems in Small States. It may have helped gather as much information about the research problem with the intent of analysing, interpreting, or theorising about the phenomenon (Merriam, 1998). Case study design allows multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 2009a), though not all sources are essential in every case study (Tellis, 1997). The importance of multiple sources of data to the reliability of the study is established by Yin. Hence, out of the six primary sources of evidence identified by Yin, this study used two. The first source of data was analysis of documents. Yin (2009b) contends that "except for studies of preliterate societies, documentary evidence is likely to be relevant to every case study topic" (101). Available relevant documents of the Maldives Qualifications Authority and the Ministry of Education of the Maldives were used as a source of data. The most important use of documents for case studies is to corroborate and argue evidence from other sources of evidence and permit the researcher to keep progressing to other case study tasks as well (Yin, 2009b). Despite these advantages, using documentation has some weaknesses. Yin points out that documentation is not

always accurate and may lack objectivity. Therefore, careful use of documents was considered in this study as the public access to some key documents was difficult.

Interviews were used as the second source of data collection for this study. The interviews were semi-structured (Merriam, 1998) *focussed interviews* (Yin, 2009b). They were guided by a list of questions or issues to be explored as Merriam recommends, and so can be called an 'open ended' but guided conversation. These questions were informed by the literature review and analysis. Asking appropriate questions is paramount for an interview that will yield useful data for research. Merriam states that "the key to getting good data from interviewing is to ask good questions" (p. 75). Therefore, an interview guide which contained a list of questions that formed the structured part of the interview was used. Yin suggests the interview data may not be completely accurate, as the responses from interviewees are subject to bias, poor recall and poor articulation. Therefore, it is necessary to, corroborate with information from other sources rather than to rely entirely on interview data.

1.5 STRUCTURAL OVERVIEW OF THE THESIS

This study is organised into six chapters. Chapter One has contextualised the study by providing an outline of the proposed thesis. It has provided a brief background and the context of the project. In particular, it has discussed the peculiarities of Small States as well as the context of the Maldives as a Small State. It also has discussed higher education transition in the Maldives in order to provide the background and the context of the higher education and the QA system in the Maldives. The chapter has discussed the research problems as well as the significance of the study for higher education quality assurance.

Chapter Two first explores literature on systems theory on which the theoretical framework is based. It reviews the existing literature pertinent to current trends in higher education quality assurance. For that, key terms of *quality* and *quality assurance* are defined through the literature. Then, there is an analysis of the differences between *standards* and *quality assurance*. After that, the literature on different agendas is discussed, followed by quality assurance models around the world, including existing models found in Small States. The theoretical perspectives drawn on to inform this study are also discussed in Chapter Two.

Chapter Three presents the methodological design for the study. The approach is discussed as it is linked to the theoretical framework. Details of data collection methods are described as they respond to the methodology. It also presents details related to participants, instruments, procedures, timeline, analysis tools, ethical considerations and limitations.

Chapter Four presents the findings of the study. The results are linked to the conceptual framework and the research questions. The data analysis undertaken in Chapter Four is discussed in Chapter Five. This chapter presents a full discussion, interpretation and evaluation of the results with reference to the literature. This chapter also includes theory-building with respect to HE QA elements and attributes within a system theory framework.

Chapter Six contains summary conclusions in which a final model for HE QA is presented. Chapter Six also highlights implications and recommendations. Directions for further research are explicated under the recommendations. The document concludes with a full bibliography and appendices.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on higher education (HE) quality assurance (QA) constructs, processes, and models. Section 2.2 gives an overview of the emergence of QA in higher education by discussing the key terms of quality in general. This review then focuses on higher education quality assurance systems. Section 2.3 provides an overview of expansion of QA in higher education. This section looks at forces and drivers behind the rapid expansion of higher education and the subsequent QA in today's world. Section 2.4 discusses the factors influencing QA in higher education by looking at crucial debates on legislative and regulatory arrangements. It also investigates how others have conceptualised, adopted and monitored standards as well as current QA models and the major processes found in QA embedded within service delivery. Section 2.5 looks at different agendas and assumptions driving the thinking behind the QA literature. Section 2.6 then situates the above discussion within the challenges faced by QA in higher education within Small States. Section 2.7 provides a synthesis of the above literature review by presenting a conceptual framework for a QA system in higher education. Section 2.8 gives a summary of the chapter and implications.

2.2 AN OVERVIEW OF QA IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Quality and *Quality Assurance* are interrelated terms that need to be defined. These two terms are defined by various stakeholders in various ways. As a result, considerable and continuous debate has occurred in defining these concepts. Quality as a concept and a process has often been used interchangeably. There are many different approaches to managing quality (Walklin, 1992). Quality assurance is one of those (Nichols, 2002).

There are numerous concepts related to quality assurance and its associated elements. Over the years, various developments have taken place relative to the assessment, monitoring, management, and improvement of the quality of different components of higher education. The domain of quality assurance, as it turns mature, is surrounded by an overwhelming array of terms and concepts. It is important to

note that there is some ambiguity in using some of these concepts, as several terms are used with the same sense.

While ‘standards’ is interchangeably used with ‘criteria’ in the United States, it is very different from ‘criteria’ as defined in Europe. ‘Quality control’ is often used interchangeably with ‘quality assurance’ and ‘quality management’. An ‘evaluation report’ is also referred to as an ‘audit report’ or ‘assessment report’. Likewise, 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 ‘external quality assurance’ (Stella, 2004).

2.2.1 Quality in general.

Harvey and Knight (1996) note that quality in HE is defined by various stakeholders in different ways. A similar sentiment was also expressed by Pillay and Kimber (2009) who delved deeper by asking: quality for whom and for what? As a result, the current literature has not yet arrived at any general consensus on how to define quality in HE. The current definitions seem to reflect the background of the authors.

Lim (2001) notes that quality is often related to commercial and manufacturing sectors where the meaning is very clear and there is little confusion. However, he argues that the same level of agreement is not there regarding the concept within the context of higher education where there are as many definitions of it as there are stakeholders. A complex situation is created when there is also no agreed notion of quality indicators, leading to different interpretations of quality, especially quality in higher education.

Defining quality is a profound interest for many authors and they differ in the way they describe it. Garvin (1984) has distinguished five approaches in defining quality: the transcendental approach; the product-oriented approach; the customer oriented approach; the manufacturing oriented approach; and the value for money approach. 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 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" (p. 62). Many of these definitions need to be further explained as there are complexities belonging to each.

The notion of quality as exceptional is explained by Harvey and Green (1993) as quality being something special. The three variations linked to this explanation are: (1) the traditional notion of quality as distinctive, (2) a view of quality as embodied in excellence, which means exceeding very high standards, and (3) a weaker notion of exceptional quality, which means passing a required set of standards. Harvey and Green explain the notion of quality as perfection or consistency, meaning setting specifications or standards which are aimed to reach (not exceed as in the quality as exceptional). The quality in this approach has two interrelated aims: zero defects and getting things right first time. Harvey and Green point out that the notion of quality as value for money equates quality with value, in particular, value for money. In this approach accountability to funders and the customers or users of the service are important. Harvey and Green elaborate that the notion of quality as fitness for purpose relates quality to the purpose of a product or service. In this approach, quality is judged in terms of the extent to which the product or service fits its purpose. In this way, every product or service has the potential to be a quality product or service.

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 local development instead of trying to compete against international institutions. As discussed in Section 2.4.2, the focus by HE on research only, as the main area of quality is misleading. Though research in higher education is only one aspect of higher education, it is often considered higher than teaching in rankings which seems to have evolved into a belief that it is the only quality indicator for HE. In terms of understanding quality, it can be said that while higher education is relative and diverse, expectations around quality could vary.

The neo-liberal agenda, in recent years, has popularised the "ability to provide value for money" as a popular definition since "the public funding bodies have

become less accepting of the universities' assurance of quality, and competing claims for scarce funds have become more pressing" (Lim, 2001, p. 14). However, "fitness for purpose" is increasingly appealing to many, to the extent that Woodhouse (2006) describes it as "the definition for all seasons" (p. 1). As apparent from these definitions, quality in higher education appears to be a relative concept. Martin and Stella (2007) argue that it means different things to different stakeholders such as students, teachers, management, and employers even within a single country. Each stakeholder has a different approach to defining quality. Therefore, questions like quality of what, quality for whom, and whose quality, arises from the outset and poses challenges to the higher education QA researchers.

Findings of a study of 30 academics from 10 Australian universities identified issues relating to conflicting definitions of quality in their critique of quality assurance mechanisms within the universities (Anderson, 2006). In that study, a lecturer in health science questioned the perception of quality as output number, not the performance. Another issue raised in the study was measuring quality of teaching by pass rate for a given unit. While a high pass rate in a class may be assumed as a consequence of good teaching, reasonably high failure rates may indicate appropriately rigorous assessment practices. Furthermore, two academics in the same study questioned the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA)'s definition of quality, noting that the emphasis was on reporting to an external body to carry out a quality audit, not about improving teaching or research—more about a compliance agenda than quality improvement. On the other hand, Gvaramadze (2008) believes that agreeing on a common definition of quality is needed to create a culture of quality in higher education. This probably highlights the current nature of a QA system, which has fragmented characteristics around the world.

Another area related to quality is measuring quality using various types of assessment. Brooks (2005) argues that assessments sometimes take the form of rankings or ratings designed by commercial media driven by profit motives, targeted to prospective students and parents. Brooks notes that such assessments are organised around three research areas that represent the expanding definition of quality: reputation, faculty research, and student experience. The specific measures or indicators of quality sometimes include program and library size, graduate characteristics, research support, and faculty publication records. These and other

indicators of quality seem to have direct links with higher education quality standards (see Section 2.4.2). However, it is worth noting the criticism of many of the assessment measures because of the weak connection between theoretical definitions of quality and its measures. Another critique is that many assessments focus on one aspect of university activities, therefore failing to capture the multidimensional facets of quality. For instance the methodological framework presented by Brooks focuses on quality measurement of research areas, not teaching. Such measurements may not reflect the full picture of higher education quality in Small States, because in those countries, research is not conducted as widely as in developed nations.

2.2.2 Quality assurance.

Quality assurance is another term which is related to quality. The term "quality assurance" refers to all the policies and processes directed to ensuring the maintenance and enhancement of quality (Lim, 2001). It is a process that ensures an agreed level of quality exists in the products and services provided by HE institutions. In assuring quality, institutional capacity, infrastructure, and human resources all need to function together. However, as indicated in Chapter One, for Small States, it appears to be particularly challenging to develop infrastructure, improve institutional capacity and to have sufficient human resources. Therefore, developing comprehensive and strong national quality assurance systems may be more difficult for Small States than for developed nations. This multi-variable nature of QA confirms the need for a systems approach.

Having an agreed quality measure (see Section 2.4.2 on standards) is important, but ensuring quality maintenance and continuous quality improvement is central to any quality assurance system (Vroeijenstijn, (1995). Woodhouse (2004) claims that although quality itself has been discussed throughout recent higher education history, quality assurance has just become a profession (where specialised people are involved) moving into the 21st century, and International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) has been a major part of that development. That does not mean quality assurance is a new idea in higher education (Harman, 1998b). Rather, it has now caught the attention of significant stakeholders in HE, such as the governments, HEIs, industry bodies and international organisations.

Harman (1998b) traces quality assurance in the form of accreditation to the early years of the 20th century in UK universities in the form of external examiners. What is new, he argues, is that "the term quality assurance, is now a more systemic and far reaching approach to ensure that institutions and systems have in place mechanisms for review, assessment and, for renewal and improvement" (p. 333). Despite all the research on quality assurance, Williams (2002) suggests, present arguments surrounding quality assurance "consist too often of superficial sound-bites, mediocre clichés and low-quality, ill-tempered non-thought that is usually more about personalities than about the life of the mind" (p. 1). Williams' claim of low quality research in the field of HE QA, raises concerns. Such arguments bring to attention that quality assurance in higher education is a contested concept (Pillay & Kimber, 2009; Vidovich, 2002). As noted above, Williams' concern is also an indication of differing interests expressed by various stakeholders of higher education.

From these various definitions of quality and quality assurance, it can be argued that quality assurance is influenced and evolved by the changing nature of the higher education sector globally. This could also be due to the direct influence of market mechanisms on higher education as such mechanisms play an important role in managing demand and thereby defining what constitutes quality (Pillay & Kimber, 2009). It should be noted that QA is a dynamic process of assuring quality. There should be mechanisms that will drive the process. For example, regulatory frameworks and standards are different mechanisms of assuring quality and they all need to function in tandem for the QA system to be effective.

2.3 AN OVERVIEW OF THE EXPANSION OF QA IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Quality of higher education has been a major focus of many countries in the world since the 1990s (Van Damme, 2000). The growth of quality assurance has been worldwide, involving countries across all continents and of all sizes with very different cultures and different stages of economic development (Lewis, 2009). This recent growth has been fuelled by a number of factors. Harman (1998b) and Lewis discussed the factors contributing to the emergence of a global quality assurance movement. First, there have been concerns from different communities and governments over academic standards and quality of students, particularly with the

effect of commodification of the higher education services and products. This partially leads to public demand for greater accountability by higher education institutions. It is also true for industrialised countries (such as OECD member countries), that there has been some pressure from employers and professionals for university courses to become more relevant to workforce needs. As a result, in industrialised countries, universities are obliged to work with employers and professionals, in order to develop acceptable quality standards.

Second, substantial growth in higher education has occurred in many countries. Expansion of private higher education, including for-profit providers and increased diversity in higher education, including the growth in distance learning and employment-based learning have put considerable pressure on governments to develop and strengthen their quality assurance mechanisms. Small States are no different when it comes to private sector involvement in higher education as shown in Chapter One with the example of the Maldives. Furthermore, there is a possibility that some of the private higher education institutions in Small States are for-profit providers and may be involved in a diverse range of delivery methods such as distance learning and employment-based learning in collaboration with foreign parties. Due to these developments in higher education provision, Small States need to address these issues by developing and strengthening appropriate quality assurance systems to ensure their students are not exploited.

Finally, the ever-increasing internationalisation of higher education, including the growth in cross-border providers and the need for mutual recognition of qualifications and credits, as well as the need for workforce mobility, have forced the governments to review their quality assurance systems. Small States are particularly vulnerable to internationalisation of higher education and new arrangements discussed here, because those States are usually a target of international providers due to apparent lack of adequate local resources in higher education. This study examined pros, cons and consequences of each of these factors, as well as the implications and contributions to the growth of quality assurance in higher education.

2.3.1 Growth in higher education.

There has been remarkable growth in higher education worldwide in recent times. Numbers of tertiary students have increased two hundred fold from 1900 to 100 million in 2001. Enrolment rates are rapidly climbing past 50 or even as high as

80 percent in some industrialised countries (Schofer & Meyer, 2005). Over the last 60 years, proportionate increases in higher education enrolment have been greater than that of population increases. While the total population of the world in 1950 was 2.557 billion, today, it is more than 6.3 billion, which is almost a two and a half fold increase. On the other hand, student enrolment in higher education institutions worldwide increased from only 6 million to 132 million in the same period, which corresponds to a twenty-two fold increase (Gürüz, 2008). It is highly probable that these worldwide figures also include the situation in Small States.

Higher education worldwide experienced a number of changes. One of the prime changes was the influence of economic globalisation. The economic power of higher education was recognised in 1995 when WTO and some countries included higher education as a tradable commodity in the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) (Bubtana, 2007; Varghese, 2007). While this could have been the main external driver for expansion of higher education, the main parallel internal driver could have been governments adopting a neo-liberal agenda, particularly the funding models such as, "output-based funding rewarding both research and teaching" (Frølich, Schmidt, & Rosa, 2010, p. 8). Apart from that, increasing demand for access to post-secondary education, and its consequent pressure on public expenditure has resulted in a strong external demand for higher education quality assurance (Law, 2010). The demand for higher education is originating from both traditional and non-traditional student cohorts as well as from well-educated adults. There is a notable increase in non-traditional cohorts with more and more female students, children of immigrants, and students from various sections of society enrolling in higher education programs (Gürüz, 2008).

The expansion of higher education has been pushed significantly by the perception that higher education graduates hold a significant income premium over individuals with lower educational qualifications. The income advantage of more educated individuals persists even in countries where there has been significant expansion in the number of people with a higher education degree. Therefore, this has contributed to the strong social demand for higher education (Teixeira, 2009). In addition, the need for lifelong learning encourages people to return regularly to post-secondary education (Daniel & Kanwar, 2006). This continuous growth in higher

education puts pressure on higher education providers to diversify their delivery methods and yet maintain an agreed minimum level of quality.

2.3.2 Increased diversity in higher education provision.

Higher education provision is not limited to traditional or conventional delivery methods. It has taken many forms such as distance learning, e-learning, and employment based learning. Also, increasingly, universities are more willing to give advanced standing or credit for these new types of learning towards university programs and the recognition of prior learning (RPL) (Lewis, 2009).

Traditional face-to-face education on campus is no longer the only form of higher education. Higher education in the 21st century is evolving rapidly (Daniel & Kanwar, 2006) with expansions into the use of technological advancements in Information Communication Technology (ICT) and other education delivery modalities. In the last two decades there has been a significant increase in different forms of higher education provision (Stella & Gnanam, 2004). Stella and Gnanam identify a variety of – sometimes overlapping – forms. They include: distance learning education programs that are delivered through different technological means across national boundaries; twinning programs, in which a degree is offered through study in more than one institution as a result of affiliation agreements between different institutions; branch campuses set up by an institution in another country to provide its educational programs to foreign students; sale of property materials such as books, coursework or testing, together with associated services; franchised operation – using a third party to give a degree, such as a computer company delivering a university computer science degree; partnerships or affiliations for overseas offering where institutions enter into collaborative arrangements with each other to offer programs in other countries; corporate universalities, which are educational entities with strategic tools to assist their parent organisation in achieving its goals by conducting activities that foster individual and organisational learning and knowledge (Allen, 2002); and virtual universities.

One of the drivers of these different forms of higher education provision has been the increase in the worldwide demand for higher education (Knight, 2006). Tens of millions of new students will be seeking higher education in the coming years. This poses new challenges to the higher education quality assurance systems around the world (Daniel & Kanwar, 2006). One of the challenges of non-traditional

delivery modalities for Small States is that they often import higher education and "often do not have mechanisms to regulate the quality of these transnational providers" (Pillay & Kimber, 2009, p. 278). Pillay and Kimber demonstrate the potentially negative impact of lack of regulation by noting how a group of Maldivian students whose qualifications were not recognised by their QA agency. It is for this reason that mechanisms are required to assure the quality of higher education provided through these non-traditional delivery modalities. The new HE QA arrangements in Malaysia, together with the establishment of the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA), appear to have addressed this issue to some extent. The MQA Act has a section for foreign programs and qualifications, which focuses is on making sure such programmes meet minimum quality standards by considering the unique features of non-traditional delivery modalities such as "foreign qualifications offered by distance learning and joint collaborative qualifications" (Office of Legislative Drafting and Publishing, 2011, pp. 37-38). The next section presents a discussion about open, distance and eLearning and its implications for quality assurance processes.

2.3.2.1 Open, Distance and eLearning.

The differences between open, distance and eLearning are a subject of debate, Daniel and Kanwar (2006) simplify these concepts by concluding that there are links between open and distance learning and therefore group them together. They claim that many of today's diverse learning forms have features of openness in them. While open learning means the removal of barriers to learning, distance learning removes barriers of space and time and makes learning more open. While the common higher education QA systems are usually shaped around traditional higher education delivery modalities, mainly on-campus education, a constant review and re-shaping of QA mechanisms are required in order to cater for the ever evolving open, distance and eLearning.

In responding to non-campus based delivery of education Guri-Rosenblit (2005) identifies three distinct differences between distance and eLearning. First, in terms of remoteness and proximity, distance education denates the physical separateness of the learner from the instructor; however, distance is not a defining characteristic of eLearning. Nevertheless, Guri-Rosenblit notes that looking at today's eLearning forms, distance is often a defining characteristic. Second, in terms

of target audience, distance education cater the needs of special clients who cannot attend a conventional campus, a face-to-face gathering or a school. However, eLearning is not exclusively targeted for distance learners and it is used by all types of students on all educational levels. Third, in terms of cost considerations, distance learning, especially at university level, has the ability to broaden access to higher education by providing economies of scale. This is not the case of eLearning as it costs more, not less than the conventional face-to-face teaching unless it reaches a certain number of students concurrently enrolled in the programs. Nonetheless, in reality, eLearning can be quite affordable as there are variations in course fees depending on who delivers it.

In contrast with Guri-Rosenblit (2005), Daniel and Kanwar (2006) dispute the argument that distance learning and eLearning are separate forms of delivery methods. They contend that eLearning is just another attractive term for distance learning and that today's eLearning is actually distance learning with elements of ICT. Furthermore, they claim that initially pure eLearning was not very popular with students. Therefore, people started adding other interesting elements such as books, to attract students while retaining the term eLearning. As a result, Daniel and Kanwar argue that the term distance learning should be used to cover all of these forms and also with respect to quality assurance.

Distance education has emerged due to the expansion of higher education demand coupled by the technological developments. According to recent research, some developed countries such as Australia, Japan, The Netherlands, UK, USA, as well as a few developing countries such as India, Mexico, Thailand and Turkey are spearheading the current drive in the provision of distance education (Stella & Gnanam, 2004). However, they argue that with the developments in World-wide-web (www), the impact of distance education is not confined to the country of origin anymore and new developments and set-ups in any origin countries affect the whole higher education scenario globally. The largest private university in USA, Phoenix University, known for its online and distance education (Knight, 2006) has over 300,000 students (Rovai & Downey, 2010). Similarly, the UK Open University has more than 200,000 students in over 70 countries (Laurillard, 2008). The Indira Gandhi National Open University – the largest open university in India – is regarded as the largest university in the world with enrolment figures of nearly three million

(Thaiindian News, 2010). Such growth in open and distance learning across national borders poses challenges for QA in higher education.

Rovai and Downey (2010) argue that an effective quality assurance strategy for online programs, which are part of eLearning, should address a wide range of processes. These include teaching staff selection and qualifications, professional development of faculty, student support services, and student outcomes. To date, different mechanisms have been used in different countries. For example, the quality of teaching of the UK Open University is assessed by the UK Quality Assurance Agency. On the other hand, Phoenix University in the USA follows an accreditation process of different accrediting agencies in the USA for different programs (Laurillard, 2008; University of Phoenix, 2010).

Daniel and Kanwar (2006) argue that if we consider quality as 'fit for purpose', then distance learning has significant advantages in terms of access and cost. Therefore, it is addressing one of the biggest challenges facing today's higher education systems around the world, which is creating access for many millions of new students every year. However, less expense does not guarantee good quality. Common logic would suggest that less cost can bring lower quality. Despite these consensuses, Daniel and Kanwar argue that distance education is revolutionary in the sense that it allows us to increase access, improve quality, and cut costs all at the same time.

The notion that distance education increases the quality of education has been questioned. Stella and Gnanam (2004) point out that there is considerable debate on what constitutes quality and how to ensure it in distance education models. Issues raised about distance education include poor quality, not being on par with regular courses, lower standards of students who enrol, and detrimental impacts on the national planning of higher education. Other areas of concern highlighted by Stella and Gnanam include the adequacy of student support services such as library and other learning resources, and interaction of students with teachers and their peers. These issues have considerable implications in regard to quality in general and in particular for Small States if not addressed by their national higher education QA agencies. Despite pointing to these quality issues of distance education, Stella and Gnanam also denote that with technological advancements and adequate awareness about ensuring quality, distance education can be made very effective.

Stella and Gnanam (2004) and other advocates of distance education argue that it is as good as traditional education if conducted properly. Despite this belief, the question of how to assure the quality of distance education, and against what standards, has constantly been asked. Stella and Gnanam acknowledge use of a guideline developed by the Institute of Higher Education Policy of the USA to assure quality of internet-based distance education, including 24 benchmarks covering seven essential aspects. Those aspects are institutional support, course development, teaching/ learning, course structure, student support, faculty support, and evaluation and assessment of the courses.

While QA is about how to enforce and manage the standards and benchmarks, it may be challenging to monitor distance education, especially evaluation and assessment (American Psychological Association, 2002). There are variations in how students are assessed in distance education courses. In some cases, the assignments are submitted electronically, by email or courier (Charles Stuart University, 2011). These forms of assessments apparently lack traditional direct supervision or monitoring by the course provider. There are, however, better supervised assessment forms in distance education where students are required to undergo supervised examinations and even attend the institution for some modules to receive face-to-face interaction and at the same time ensure the authenticity of the person submitting the course requirements. With these variations in assessment, the quality may not be a stable concept with respect to distance education.

An initiative was carried out by the US regional accreditation commissions who developed standards that cover five major areas relating to institutional activities relevant to distance education: institutional context and commitment, curriculum and instruction, faculty support, student support, and evaluation and assessment (Stella & Gnanam, 2004). From these initiatives, it is known that accrediting agencies have launched guidelines for distance education programs (Swail & Kampits, 2001). Enforcing these guidelines is critical. In the USA, the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education proposes accrediting agencies to build strong quality review policies into their guidelines and evaluation criteria (Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, 2008). This indicates the importance of enforcement of guidelines. Small States may find this challenging due to lack of resources. A guideline developed in the UK by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), is arranged

under six categories: (1) system design, (2) program design, approval and review, (3) management of program delivery, (4) student development and support, (5) student communication and representation, and (6) student assessment (Stella & Gnanam, 2004).

Table 2.1 illustrates the areas of institutional activities that are focussed on by two American QA bodies and UK QAA. Though different terms are used, the common areas of scrutiny of institutional activities in both the USA and the UK guidelines for distance education focus on five major areas: (1) institutional structure and capacity, (2) program structure and delivery, (3) faculty support, (4) student support, and (5) student assessment. The main difference between the focus of the USA and the UK is that QAA of the UK regards student communication and representation as an area that needs to be scrutinised. This is not included in either of the American guidelines. Another difference is the faculty support, which is included in both American guidelines, but not included in the UK QAA guideline. In Small States, it is particularly important to ensure their students receive quality education due to increased exposure to distance education. Hence, it is crucial for Small States to develop and enforce appropriate guidelines to assure quality of HE through distance education modalities whether it is online or correspondence.

Table 2.1

QA categories for distance education

Institute of Higher Education Policy, USA	Regional Accreditation Commissions, USA	Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), UK
Institute of Higher Education Policy, USA	Regional Accreditation Commissions, USA	Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), UK
Institutional support	Institutional context and commitment	System design
Course development	Curriculum and instruction	Program design approval and review
Faculty support and Evaluation	Faculty support	--------*
Teaching/ learning	--------*	Management of program delivery
Course structure	--------*	--------*
Student support	Student support	Student development and support
Assessment of the courses	Evaluation and assessment	Student assessment
--------*	--------*	Student communication and representation

*The dashes in the table indicate that area of institutional activity does not appear to be a major focus according to their documents.

2.3.3 Increase in the number of private higher education providers.

A private higher education institution can be defined as an institution "controlled and managed by a nongovernmental organisation (e.g., a Church, Trade Union or business enterprise), or its Governing Board consists mostly of members not selected by a public government agency but by private institutions" (Vincent-Lancrin, 2009, p. 261). During the past decade, with the emergence of the private sector in the higher education environment the sector has become more competitive and consequently warrants the need for more rigorous quality assurance. While there has been a relative decline of public higher education sectors, in contrast, the private sector has been broadly growing (Vincent-Lancrin, 2009). One of the major forces promoting the role of the private providers has been the significant increase in demand for higher education sectors globally (Teixeira, 2009) and the re-structuring of higher education sectors by many governments that allowed operation of many private institutions of higher education (Varghese, 2004).

The recent growth and demand of the private higher education sector has warranted governments to ensure that the quality of the education services provided by the private providers is comparable to those of the public sector HE institutions and thus QA has received greater attention (Wells, Sadlak, & Vlăsceanu, 2007). In

some countries, the development of quality assurance and accreditation systems is noted as a response from governments to manage the increasingly complex situation created by the increase of private higher education providers (Van Damme, 2000). Van Damme's assertion that the growth in private providers is a complex situation is perhaps explained by his observation that higher education QA systems were established in an environment of changing relationships between the state and the institutional field. He points out that this changing relationship is characterised by "regulation, increasing institutional autonomy, devolution of authority, and shifting balance between state and market oriented elements" (p. 11). Private sector higher education is often characterised by the large numbers of fairly small institutions. This is true even in those countries with a well-established private sector such as the United States; where the number of private institutions represents almost 60% of the sector though enrol less than 25% of total students (Teixeira, 2009). Another diverse element of the private sector is their for-profit nature.

2.3.3.1 For-profit providers.

Private higher education providers are often referred to as 'for-profit' providers. Although historically private higher education institutions were established as non-profit organisations, recent commodification of education and exponential growth in the sector has witnessed an increasing trend of profit-making (Teixeira, 2009). Since market-oriented initiatives are often associated with profit maximisation, this new trend caused public concern about the quality of for-profit providers (Cunningham et al., 2000). Such providers emerged due to the needs of adult learners and the rising tuition costs at traditional colleges (Morey, 2004). The concept of for-profit provision of higher education has been regarded as one of the biggest challenges facing today's quality control of higher education. Morey (2004) claims this type of provider is an expanding segment of American higher education fuelled by the rapid growth and huge financial profit. Increasingly, such for-profit institutions are becoming international in scope and operate across borders. The problem compounds as the focus of for-profit providers shifts to the higher levels of university education instead of vocational programs, which was their earlier focus (Morey, 2004).

Teixeira (2009) points out that in many countries, for-profit providers are not allowed largely because of the local authorities' inability to ensure quality of services

and hold them accountable in the event of any irregularities. Often, many institutions established with a non-profit status still operate as if they were for profit. Thus, the whole dynamic of the higher education sector is affected. Consequently, for-profit provision of higher education has become a challenge to regulatory authorities for quality assurance. As a result, for the relevant bodies, it is proving to be increasingly difficult to deal with this challenge. The role of the governments and QA bodies becomes crucial for ensuring the quality of education from institutions that have commercial agendas.

2.3.4 Regional developments.

Some of the recent regional developments in higher education quality assurance have made interesting contributions to the quality debate. The most influential regional initiative has been the Bologna Process and the resulting new arrangements aimed at enhancing overall quality of higher education. The Bologna Process is an intergovernmental process deriving from the 1999 Bologna Declaration uniting 46 European countries in order to establish a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) (Gvaramadze, 2008). The effect of the Bologna Process has been worldwide as many countries outside of Europe are using it as a major benchmark as they try to develop and strengthen their quality assurance systems. One such example is the revised Maldives National Qualifications Framework, which sets the standard duration for a Masters degree as two years, in line with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) – a part of the Bologna Process (Maldives Qualifications Authority, 2010b).

Another regional development can be seen in the Caribbean region. The countries of the Caribbean Community and Common market (CARICOM) have been trying to establish quality assurance and accreditation mechanisms to monitor the educational provisions of educational services by their institutions as well as transnational providers (Gift, Leo-Rhynie, & Moniquette, 2006). Other regional quality assurance networks established in the Asia Pacific region (Asia pacific Quality Network – APQN), Latin America and Caribbean region (RIACS), Africa (Southern African Development Community – SADC) North Africa and Middle Eastern region (Arab Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education – ANQAHE) have also started to galvanise the countries in those regions with respect to higher education quality assurance (Materu, 2007).

2.3.5 Internationalisation of higher education.

Internationalisation or globalisation is affecting the way people think about higher education. Globalisation and internalisation are different as Knight (2006) defines internationalisation of higher education as "the process of integrating an international, intercultural, and global dimension into the purpose, functions (teaching, research, service) and delivery of higher education" (p. 18). Internationalisation is related to a number of recent developments in the way higher education is provided. Higher education institutions find themselves not only accountable to stakeholders within their own countries, but also to the international community (Stensaker & Harvey, 2011).

This global higher education agenda is fuelling international activities such as international student mobility, international academics or guest speakers, international performance rankings of universities, establishment of international quality assurance schemes, joint degrees, strategic partnerships and numerous other activities. These activities pose new accountability challenges to universities and colleges (Stensaker & Harvey, 2011). It is also true that due to internationalisation or globalisation, there has been an exponential increase in cross-border high education providers. At the same time, there are issues relating to students' mobility such as recognition of foreign qualifications, credits and study periods (Van Damme, 2000). These issues have been seen as major challenges to quality assurance and need to be addressed in developing quality assurance systems particularly for Small Sates who often have very little influence in these global initiatives.

Cross-border higher education refers to the "movement of people, programs, providers, knowledge, ideas, projects and services across national boundaries" (Knight, 2006, p. 18). The terms *cross-border education* and *transnational education* have been used interchangeably in the quality assurance area (Stella, 2006). However, the term cross-border education is mostly used by UNESCO and OECD since the introduction of UNESCO–OECD Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-Border Higher Education (Stella, 2006); (UNESCO, 2005). Cross-border higher education providers are sometimes described as "later-day pirates" but at the same time, and in contrast, have also been seen as a significant contributor to the educational needs of developing countries (Daniel et al., 2006, p. 1).

A significant increase in cross-border higher education during the last two decades has been noticed (Stella, 2006). This increase has been linked to the developments in information and computer technology (ICT). Though ICT gives a lot of benefits and advantages, it has also added complexity and the risk of students falling victim to low quality provisions and 'bogus' qualifications. Furthermore, the increase of mobility of professionals and the consequent demand for recognition of qualifications compound the complexity. All these developments pose new challenges to the national policies of quality assurance (Stella, 2006). Although terms like cross-border higher education and for-profit providers are used separately, they are often the same group; for-profit providers of higher education are increasingly crossing borders driven by the lucrative market of international students seeking higher education. Enforcing quality guidelines is a critical challenge.

Increasing student mobility has reinforced the conviction that the most effective means for preparing future graduates for the global economy is to study and live abroad. Though the United States has the largest number of foreign students with 34% of the OECD total, Australia, Canada and the UK are also among the top host countries. Furthermore, the newly industrialised countries in Asia and the Pacific region (Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, Singapore, China, Hong Kong) are the major sources of foreign students (Van Damme, 2000). Increasing numbers of students from Small States are also seeking higher education in many of the industrialised and OECD countries. As a result, the quality assurance agencies in Small States need to address issues of credit transfer and qualifications recognition.

2.3.5.1 Recognition of Foreign Qualifications.

As HE services are delivered across borders, the issue of validation and recognition of the qualifications of those who seek to study and work in other countries has been an old problem in international relations in higher education. As a result, a number of international organisations have taken several initiatives to resolve this, such as the elaboration of declarations and conventions and agreements between States and the establishment of information centres and electronic databases (Van Damme, 2000).

UNESCO has introduced six regional conventions on recognition of qualifications and one interregional convention. While Africa, the Arab States, Asia and Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean regions have one convention for each,

the European region has two conventions; 1979 and 1997. The interregional convention belongs to the Mediterranean region. These conventions are legal agreements between the countries that ratified the conventions in each region. An important feature of these conventions is the emphasis on issuance of "diploma supplement" by the institutions, which describes the type, the level, the contents and the status of a given qualification in a standardised way. It is, therefore, an information tool, to be used to enhance the transparency of the qualifications, leading to the recognition of such qualifications by other countries (UNESCO, 2003). Van Damme (2000) argues that "by using the concept of recognition, the countries trust upon the effectiveness of the system of the quality assurance and accreditation in fellow countries" (p. 9). Recognition of qualifications is included as a mandate of some quality assurance agencies of Small States such as the Maldives and Trinidad and Tobago. Therefore, realising and understanding the international agreements such as the UNESCO conventions may prove useful for Small States.

2.3.5.2 Recognition of Credits and Study Periods.

Ratification of UNESCO conventions assures a level of agreement on what constitutes quality in HE despite the structural and educational differences between higher education systems around the world and an apparent lack of transparency at national, international and even within university faculty levels which creates questions of trust. In cross border provision of HE services, there is often wide spread uncertainty about the recognition of credits and study periods of programs. This may pose challenges for making decisions on recognition or non-recognition of credits and study periods from institutions of different countries where students may have spent time and money (Van Damme, 2000).

Arrangements for mutual recognition of credits and study periods seem to be happening through regional and bilateral agreements. One such example is the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). It is a framework whereby participating countries agree to recognise components of study and therefore facilitate transferability of credits. In this system, there is an extensive information package describing the curricula, courses, study points, educational culture, evaluation culture, etc., of an institution. Another crucial instrument is the *transcript of records*, with a list of courses or modules and the study results of a student, enabling transfer

of credits to other university programs. Under this framework, the standard full-time load for one year is 60 points (credits) (Van Damme, 2000).

Recognition of credits under ECTS system does not entail prior checking of content, teaching method, workload, or student assessment procedures (Van Damme, 2000). Where critical elements of HE programs are ignored, it is difficult to check for equivalency of credits under such a system. It also raises the risk of compromising the quality when those involved assume that if set standards are followed, all outcomes will automatically be equivalent. Van Damme argues that under such a system, quality is undermined, because the content comparability and educational culture is bypassed. Therefore, Van Damme suggests that a global adoption of ECTS for credit transfer may be unlikely. In this way, excessive or minimal recognition of credits may undermine the educational value for students. This may have ramifications for QA agencies in Small States when the quality is undermined by higher education providers if too much or insufficient credit is given to programs without proper verification.

2.4 FACTORS INFLUENCING QA IN HIGHER EDUCATION

As mentioned in Chapter One, the three main elements emphasised in this study which constitute the model for Small States are: (1) legislative framework, (2) standards, and (3) service delivery. These areas related to QA in higher education are consistent in higher education QA systems around the world and are more apparent in countries where there are more advanced QA systems such as Australia, New Zealand, the UK, the USA, and European countries. This chapter will investigate these three key elements of QA in higher education in the light of current literature. Section 2.4.1 presents the literature review and related discussions under Regulatory Framework and the subsections that follow focus on issues related to governance and regulation. Section 2.4.2 2.4.2discusses the issues related to the standards debate, with a view to rankings and accountability. Section 2.4.3 focuses on the QA within HE models.

2.4.1 Regulatory framework.

2.4.1.1 Importance of regulation and regulatory authority in a QA system.

Recently, many countries have set appropriate standards for HE QA and are also making sure a rigorous system of quality assurance with accreditation and

academic audit is in place to ensure that standards are maintained. Such a system could include both program and institutional accreditation and academic audit. For example, 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 et al., 2008). Therefore, developing a formal 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 implementation of the agreed standards.

In response to the findings of the Bradley review (Bradley et al., 2008), the Australian government established a new national regulatory body for enhancing quality and accreditation in higher education called the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA). This body was established in 2010 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009) and governed by the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (Consequential Amendments and Transitional Provisions) Act 2011 to provide quality assurance. This example shows the importance of legislation for HE QA. In fact, legislation has become a benchmark for higher education quality assurance agencies (ENQA, 2006).

Many of today's leading HE QA agencies are created by legislation. Some of these agencies are created by a dedicated parliamentary Act as in Malaysia and Australia. In Australia, the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA) was created by a single piece of legislation, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (Consequential Amendments and Transitional Provisions) Act 2011 (Office of Legislative Drafting and Publishing, 2011). Similarly, in Malaysia, the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) was created by a single piece of legislation and named Malaysian Qualifications Agency Bill 2007 (Parliament of Malaysia, 2007). In some other countries, HE QA agencies are powered by provisions in a number of pieces of legislation as in New Zealand and South Africa. For example, in New Zealand, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) operates under three legislations (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2012). They are The Education Act (1989), The Education Amendment Act (2011) and The Industry Training Act (1992). The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) is governed by even more Acts (South African Qualifications Authority, 2012): the

Skills Development Levies Act; Further Education and Training Colleges Act; Higher Education Act; National Qualifications Framework Act; Skills Development Act; and Adult Basic Education and Training Act. These developments indicate that countries are realising the need for legislative arrangements in setting up HE QA agencies that will in turn enhance the overall HE QA system.

2.4.1.2 Underlying principles in regulatory frameworks.

Most quality assurance models around the world have largely been based on conceptions of quality assurance that originated in North West Europe and the USA (Harvey & Williams, 2010). Harvey argues that there are few variations in the methods adopted by quality assurance agencies. Yet, conceptions of quality and methods of adopting a QA system are different. Though there are standard features apparent in many QA systems, Lewis (2009) points out that there are differences in QA models according to the jurisdictions where they operate.

The explanation of these differences by Lewis (2009) emphasises external quality assurance. First, there are differences in the scope of the review as some agencies undertake it at institutional level, others only at the program level while the majority do both. Second, there are differences about whether reports are published and made public. Third, there are variations in the freedom institutions have in completing self-evaluations. Last, there are differences in the way site visits for monitoring QA processes are conducted. It seems that the underlying principles for these differences in site visits are linked to the way quality and quality assurance is perceived, the degree of belief that quality assurance is an accountability mechanism, the size of the national higher education, and the relationship between the QA agencies and institutions. The reasons for variations in QA systems are also relevant to Small States, because the same principles exist among Small States.

For any national quality assurance and accreditation system to meet global standards, it needs to have in place certain elements, such as appropriate quality assurance practices that fit to the context in which it operate and academic and management structures. There is a view that any quality assurance system should not deviate from the fundamental principles on which quality assurance of higher education systems are based (ENQA, 2006). Therefore, these principles are discussed in the following sections.

2.4.1.3 One strong national agency for higher education QA.

There is a growing body of critique on 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. This can lead them to become over-burdening. Also, Bradley et al. (2008) note that division of responsibility, in some cases, between different regions or states in a country increases inefficiency and fragmentation. These issues are not unique to a particular quality assurance regulatory system, but are signs of increasing pressures on these systems to strengthen HE QA systems (King, 2007). The idea of one strong national agency for higher education QA means having an integrated system where all the elements of the QA are clearly linked and actively performing their roles. Adoption of a systems theory framework will allow higher education quality assurance to be considered a single yet differentiated unit.

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. 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). The review identified national HE QA to be organised within a one-tier system as well as to be independent of government and higher education institutions as two characteristics. 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 (professional) 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 in quality assurance.

An ENQA report (ENQA, 2006) suggests selecting members for the QA agency's board in their personal capacity (though an advisory council with

representation of the stakeholders, HEIs, employer organisations and professional associations is recommended to supplement the board). However, the Malaysian QA system adopts a system where board members are selected in their capacity of having special knowledge, experience and professionalism in matters relating to higher education and employment have to be from a professional body (Parliament of Malaysia, 2007). To select members from a professional body, as in Malaysia, seems to be different from the European system where members are not selected in their personal capacity. The selection of members from professional bodies indicates members will be representing their office or job. In contrast, selecting members in their personal capacity, as in Europe, indicates they will be operating as an individual expert in the field. On the other hand, the South African system also selects 12 members in their personal capacity – similar to what is suggested in the ENQA report – including two from organised labour (Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, 2008).

Apart from stakeholder representation in the regulatory board, there is emerging literature on a collaborative arrangement for other QA aspects. One such area is academic audits where "input and influence of all stakeholders should be sought and facilitated" (Skolnik, 2010, p. 17). Skolnik suggests that such inclusiveness in the academic audit process will also help ensure transparency of the QA processes. Similarly, Houston (2010) spots a shift of focus of higher education quality assurance agencies from control and surveillance to the "development of negotiated mechanisms for enhancement" (p. 179).

As much as collaboration is useful within national HE QA systems, collaboration across borders with regional and international partners also has emerged as a modern day HE QA feature. Such collaboration is noted by an ENQA report, which identifies UNESCO/ OECD guidelines as a "collaboration on European as well as international scale" (Bennett et al., 2010, p. 28). Bennett et al. note that the hope is these guidelines will encourage stakeholders to implement the HE QA system on both a global and national scale. Recent research about higher education regionalisation found that collaboration among various QA agencies offers various opportunities such as the chance to network with each other and to find potential monetary donors through international conferences even after they return home (Madden, 2012). In addition to collaboration between cross-border QA agencies,

cross-border collaboration between HEIs can also strengthen the capacity for and increase the efficiency of delivery of academic programs (Kettunen, 2010; see also Section 2.3.1). Kettunen also recommends collaboration among various faculties of the same HEI and among local HEIs, through cross-evaluating of degree programs. Kettunen also argues that such collaboration can "enhance the quality culture" (p. 38) of the HEIs.

Also, the separation of quality assurance agencies from the government functions and the HE institutions is central to ensure transparency and mitigate against any conflict of interest (ENQA, 2006). A recent study of HE QA systems of Small States of Commonwealth has found that in many of those countries, "clarity in lines of reporting and avoidance of conflicts of interests are weak" (Stella, 2010, p. 33). Hence, Stella suggests to develop policies to eliminate the risk of conflict of interest of board members. Mitigation of conflict of interest is important, because it greatly affects the running of the board (Carlson & Davidson, 1999). To this end, Davis and Stark (2001) suggest asking people with potential conflict to be excluded from discussion where conflict may arise.

The characteristics mentioned above may well be necessary for higher education QA models for Small States. A one-tier system may be particularly relevant to Small State contexts where more than one body in QA may result in a waste of public resources and duplication, particularly given their human and financial resource constraints (Harman, 1996; Stella, 2010). The concept of a well-represented board can address many of the issues QA bodies face with stakeholders.

ENQA's (2006) review explains that the purpose of vesting the authority to decide on accreditation to the quality assurance body is to create high levels of transparency. However, to mitigate a possible drawback in having both the process and the decision that follows from the process with the same body, the ENQA review points out the necessity of a well-functioning appeal system for the benefit of the accredited programs. This is highly relevant to Small States as they often, because of limited human resources, have agencies performing a number of roles, some of which may be in conflict. The independence of a higher education QA body is also vital and will be elaborated further in the next section.

2.4.1.4 Independence of the national agency for quality assurance.

Independence of the quality assurance body is a widely advocated principle in today's quality assurance regulatory circle (Ala-Vähälä & Saarinen, 2010; Bradley et al., 2008; Harman, 1998b; Van Vught & Westerheijden, 1994). As discussed in the previous section, it is also heavily promoted in ENQA standards (ENQA, 2006; European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), 2009). Normally, the underlying concept in the principle of independence is the independence of the quality assurance body from ministries, higher education institutions or other stakeholders (Billing, 2004; ENQA, 2006; European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), 2009).

Operational independence is highlighted in European quality standards as the most important aspect of independence (ENQA, 2006). It implies that important processes, including definition and operation of procedures and methods, nomination and appointment of external experts, and formulation of conclusions and recommendations in the reports should be undertaken independently from ministries, educational institutions and other stakeholders. The independence of the national body is part of the overall regulatory system.

In order to ensure transparency and operational independence, it is crucial to have official documents such as a legislative act (ENQA, 2006), and appropriate standards and guidelines (Blackmur, 2008a; European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), 2009). It is through the legal framework that the independent national agencies should acquire the full legal authority to enforce HE quality assurance regulations. Such a legal framework should have a full description of the mandate and tasks of the national agency (ENQA, 2006). Having all these important documents in place could also increase the accountability of the national QA agencies for higher education. This is a major issue for Small States, as evident in a recent survey carried out by INQAAHE which suggest that these States can benefit from regional and international best practice standards guidelines within a collaborative arrangement (Stella, 2010). However, the challenge of having a regulatory framework to manage cross-border, online and other transnational provision of higher education is further complicated by questions such as whose legislations oversee the enforcement of quality. Many higher education QA agencies in Small States may not have documentation, including proper legislation in place; in

the light of this discussion, it might be assumed that their operational independence is undermined. In this case, there should be mechanisms to promote transparency to mitigate against the resulting negativity around potential loss of independence.

2.4.1.5 Autonomy vs. regulatory state.

As discussed in Section 2.4.3.1, HE QA Models from a Historic Perspective, there have been two different national styles in quality assurance, which some researchers also refer to as two models: (1) the autonomous or self-regulatory system; and (2) the regulatory system (King, 2007; Van Vught & Westerheijden, 1994). Chiang (2004) defines autonomy as the university's power to govern its own affairs without external interference. The degree of autonomy a university has can be understood by identifying the decision-making powers the institution has over their academic, personnel (staffing), and financial and institutional governance affairs. King suggests that a regulatory system can be referred to the exercise of control by independent regulatory bodies or even the government itself over quality assurance in higher education.

Van Vught and Westerheijden (1994) claim that the motivation behind Western European governments' strategy directed towards more autonomy for higher education institutions in the second half of 1980s was to stimulate their responsiveness to the perceived needs of the economy and of society. This is likely to be the preferred approach by higher education institutions (Blackmur, 2004). The importance of this approach is underpinned by the suggestion that autonomy is a necessity for universities to properly discharge their mission (Chiang, 2004). Autonomy of a higher education institution can enhance the neo-liberal agenda of marketisation of higher education. Furthermore, academic freedom often ensures that external government regulation of higher education institutions is not very rigid or strict (King, 2007). Therefore, there is a responsibility of governments for accountability of public expenses. However, under the notion of academic freedom, governments will have little to say on what is taught and how it is taught. Blackmur (2004) alleges that there is essential weakness in most models of self-regulation, caused by the lack of appropriate elements of externality (which seem to be a reference to external audits) that are fundamental to the credibility of a sound QA system.

The regulatory system with pre-described standards and guidelines for making activities accessible and assessable, can enhance transparency of quality assurance processes and accountability of higher education institutions (King, 2007). However, there are variations in the interpretation of what is regulatory. For instance, Kohler (2003) categorises accreditation, recognition and quality assurance itself as "regulatory mechanisms". Yet, these regulatory mechanisms need to be based on some legislation to give it strength to act. One way of regulating HE QA is the command and control approach. An example of this approach is that of the South African higher education system (King, 2007). King defines the command and control model as the "prescriptive nature of regulation – the command – supported by the threat of some negative sanction – the control" (p. 419). Some countries such as Australia are currently in the process of strengthening the regulatory systems to ensure a rigorous system of accreditation and quality assurance (Bradley et al., 2008). A new comprehensive and independent national regulatory body called Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) was established in Australia in 2010 with legislative authority to carry out accreditation and quality audit functions in the higher education sector (Bradley et al., 2008; Commonwealth of Australia, 2009).

Van Vught and Westerheijden (1994) suggest that both approaches of self-regulation and autonomy, and accountability to an external regulatory body should be incorporated in today's quality assurance system. They argue that "focusing on only one of these two models leads to a risky overestimation of specific functions and practices of higher education institutions" (Van Vught & Westerheijden, 1994, p. 370). Autonomy is often associated with academic freedom (Romo de la Rosa, 2007) and may allow an acceptable degree of flexibility in managing universities with their organisation and management, financial, staffing, and academic autonomy (Estermann & Nokkala, 2009). Hence, giving universities a certain degree of autonomy, and also making them accountable to the national quality assurance agency, may facilitate better assurances of quality in higher education.

2.4.1.6 Operational procedures of QA systems.

The criteria and guidelines used by a quality assurance agency are vital for its operation in the sense that if the criteria and standards used to determine quality are unknown, its practices may be controversial and disputed (Blackmur, 2008a). That is

why it is important to pre-define, publish and disseminate the processes, criteria and procedures of the functions of the agencies (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), 2009). Though, areas needed for development of guidelines can vary according to the mandate of the quality assurance agencies. The areas of operation that are commonly seen in many HE QA systems, as noted by Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area are: self-assessment, external assessment, publication of a report, and follow-up procedures to review actions of the institutions after the report (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), 2009).

In addition to these areas, formal documentation is required for the quality assurance agencies' own internal accountability. Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area have outlined the accountability procedures needed for a quality assurance agency. They include the following:

- A published policy for the assurance of quality itself, made available in its website;
- Documentation which demonstrates that:
    - The agency's process and results reflect its mission and goals of quality assurance;
    - The agency has in place, and enforces, a no-conflict-of-interest mechanism in the work of its external experts;
    - The agency has reliable mechanisms that ensure the quality of any activities and material produced, if some or all of elements in its quality assurance procedure are subcontracted to other parties;
    - The agency has in place internal quality assurance procedures which include an internal feedback mechanism (i.e. means to collect feedback from its own staff and council/board); an internal reflection mechanism (i.e. means to react to internal and external recommendations for improvement); and an external feedback mechanism (i.e. means to collect feedback from experts and reviewed institutions for future development) in order to inform and underpin its own development and improvement;

- A mandatory cyclical external review of the agency's activities at least once every five years (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), 2009).

Pre-described standards for making activities accessible and assessable are often referred to as transparency tools and it have emerged as a global principle (King, 2007). For instance the South African Qualifications Authority used the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), to facilitate the movement of learners within as well as between higher education systems (Education & (ENQA), 2008). In this case, the NQF has been used as an instrument for standardising quality within and across universities thereby allowing transfer of credits between them. The standards of education and training outcomes, their associated assessment criteria, as well as the qualifications are described and registered in the NQF and are publically accessible (South African Qualifications Authority, 2000). There have been recent efforts in many Small States such as the Maldives, Samoa, and many other countries in the Asia Pacific, Africa, and the Caribbean to develop and strengthen NQFs (Keevy et al., 2008). But concentrating only on NQF would not be enough if the goal were to develop a comprehensive system of higher education quality assurance with all the necessary elements and relationships to support various QA roles and functions.

2.4.2 Higher education quality standards.

Any quality measure has to have some basis for judging quality (Jackson, 1998). Sometimes high output is seen as an indication of quality performance, implying high efficiency of the institutional systems. Universities that graduate more students may be seen as institutions having high quality performance. Here the judgment is on organisational performance which is different from the quality of the courses or quality of graduates that come from these courses. On the other hand, delivery modalities of a good program can make the results different for the same program. Therefore a good program can yield good or poor results depending on the delivery. This is seen in the outcome of onshore and offshore delivery of programs. Small States are often at the receiving end of such offshore programs, which may be perceived as quality programs because they are offered by universities from the industrialised world. Judging quality raises questions on the often narrow focus of academic standards; whether it is quality of programs, quality of delivery or quality of resources that support learning.

Having standards for all aspects of a system may well be more in line with the systems theory approach proposed in this study. In Australia, standards and guidelines are categorised into two: threshold and non-threshold. (Higher Education Standards Panel [Australian Government], 2013). Even though, a clear definition of threshold and non-threshold is given neither by the TEQSA Act; nor by the Australian Higher Education Standards Panel, looking at the areas included under each, it can be assumed that threshold standards are the core standards and non-threshold are the remaining supporting standards. Albeit with different terminologies, the same approach is used in Europe (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), 2009). Figure 2.1 illustrates the critical areas of HE QA standards and guidelines based on these Australian and European approaches.

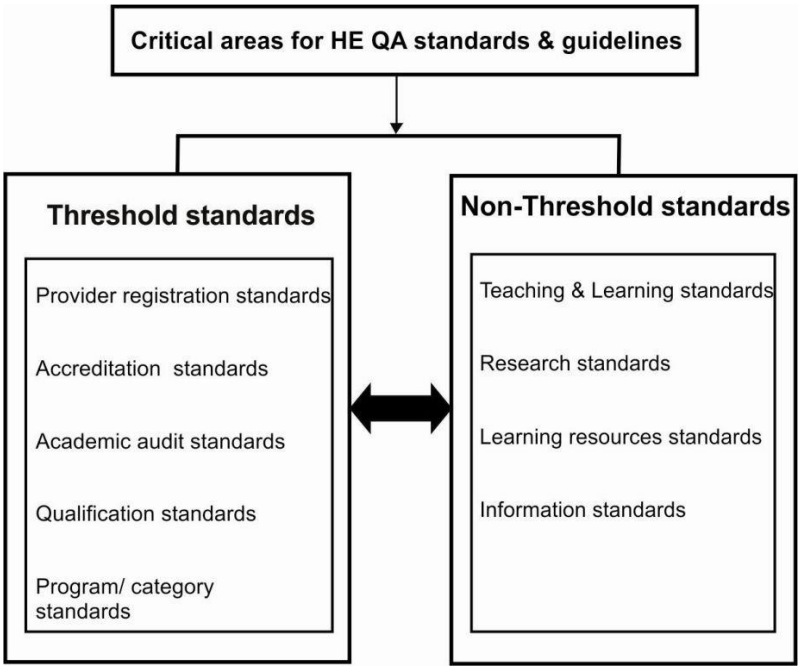

Figure 2.1. Critical areas for HE QA standards

Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education differ in focus to that of the newly introduced Higher Education Standards Framework of Australia. The European "standards and guidelines are based on a number of basic principles about quality assurance, both internal and external to higher education in the EHEA" (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), 2009, p. 14). Hence, ENQA guidelines envisage important roles of external QA (academic audit). On the other hand, as illustrated in Figure 2.1, the Australian Higher Education Standards Framework consists of threshold (core) and non-threshold (secondary) areas for standards (Higher Education

Standards Panel [Australian Government], 2013). Even though the European standards are for internal and external quality assurance, a close look at these standards reveals that there are some common features such as standards for review of programs (accreditation), teaching, learning resources and information systems. However, the bulk of the European standards focus on academic audit (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), 2009). Conversely, Australian standards have a strong focus on registration and accreditation.

2.4.2.1 Definition of standards.

Defining academic standards is difficult (Jackson, 1998), which in turn makes the measurement of quality and quality assurance in HE complicated. However, Jackson argues that "setting academic standards is a deliberate process involving defining expectations and requirements, and measuring achievement against these objectives" (p. 135). Academic standards are perceived as a criterion, or a set of criteria, against which the quality of an academic performance is assessed (Bridges, 1997). On the other hand, a quality assurance process, in some cases, involves the evaluation of the academic programs and the organisations capacity to deliver educational services at an agreed standard in order to judge its capability within a specified standards framework (Manyaga, 2008).

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. Concurring and expanding on Sadler's idea, Bridges (1997) argues that the 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. 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" (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), 2010, p. 1). This is an indication that these standards are used to make the quality assurance services more transparent for the public. This may be an issue for Small States, where the resources and capacity are not sufficient to develop such transparency tools.

2.4.2.2 Scope of standards.

Academic standards and QA systems may give prominence to different areas. However, it can be argued that physical facilities, teaching and learning, research, services, human resource capacity, quality assurance, and academic programs are common areas to include in a HE standard which, in turn, are included in HE QA systems (University of Dar Es Salaam, 2010).

In higher education quality assurance, quality indicators with expected *minimum standards* of performance and reporting requirements are used to operationalise the quality accountability mechanism of universities. Often these indicators are clustered around key functions of higher education institutions such as research, teaching and service (Pillay & Kimber, 2009).

Other terms associated with standards are criteria, manuals and guidelines. Guidelines are more commonly used by QA bodies such as INQAAHE. The apparent evidence is the INQAAHE Guidelines of Good Practice in Higher Education (International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), 2009). However, these are only descriptors that support the standards and for a whole higher education system there needs to be more than standards.

While the standards exist to assist with the implementation of QA, one first has to establish what to implement. INQAAHE assumes that developing standards and criteria is associated with international best practice. This is problematic as it assumes a degree of homogeneity as to what constitutes best practice. Best practice in the developed world is supported through rich economic capacities, which many of the Small States may not have. Given the vast difference in investment capacities of universities for the developed and Small Sates, the fitness for purpose approach is perhaps better conceptualised as it is cognisant of the local context where the majority of the graduates will be employed.

One of the principal aims of introducing a standards-based quality assurance system, mostly through a qualifications framework, is to increase national and international credibility and comparability of qualifications by a wider international audience (Laugharne, 2002). This can act as an important benchmark for Small States as it will facilitate recognition of qualifications and mobility of workforce across nations. Further discussion of this issue is presented under section 2.3.5. Also

another “important objective of introducing academic standards is to create the conditions and the environment where these standards can be made more transparent and open to public scrutiny” (Jackson, 1998, p. 134). Jackson notes that the UK strongly advocated this approach which was adopted by many other countries. Standards are transparent only when made into public documents. Jackson (1998) argues that:

> ensuring higher standards in higher education is ultimately about the professional standards of the teachers [academic staff] , manifested through good teaching, scholarship and the quality of student learning and the motivation and abilities of the learners themselves who engage with the learning process in order to achieve their full potential (p. 139).

Jackson’s connection of standards to only teaching may be viewed as a narrow view, since research seems to provide a key benchmark for QA in higher education as well. It also disregards the service role of universities.

Apart from academic standards, ISO 9000 standards have been used for the purpose of certification of the quality assurance mechanisms (Berghe, 1997). It has become the basic quality standard in many industrial sectors. Though ISO 9000 had originally been conceived for companies in the manufacturing industry, its application spread to other sectors of the economy. Berghe notes that in addition to some vocational and general education institutions and schools, some higher education institutions also took interest in the ISO 9000 standards.

2.4.2.3 Setting standards.

Standards are important to provide a basis for building the confidence of public, employers, parents, and students in the higher education system. This confidence and trust is built through setting respectable level of standards that are realistic and achievable (Manyaga, 2008). Therefore, in addition to setting standards, the governance and management of standards is also important in order to establish and maintain a systemic QA system for higher education.

Standards are set by various stakeholders. In some countries, various professional bodies or agencies set standards. It can be a government agency responsible for quality assurance or professional associations of various kinds who set standards in their areas of disciplinary interest (Yorke, 1999). According to Jackson (1998), there are three different types of systems which set the standards

namely: (1) a national statutory body; or (2) a professional body; or (3) an institution. National statutory bodies are concerned with national regulation, in which standards are determined at a national level. Professional bodies or subject associations frame the conditions of subject expectations and influence the conditions of standards. In the case of standards determined by institutions, inputs, processes, and outputs are controlled by the institution. However, when institutions set their own standards, the question of credibility and enforceability is raised. This issue becomes critical when graduates are judged by their respective professions. Consequently, in order to increase credibility, institutions need to have in place a mechanism to ensure their standards are accepted by the professions—which is the ultimate objective of university programs. In this respect, Coates (2010) identified industry engagement together with institutional resources and characteristics as methods of input for standards of higher education for HEIs.

The process of setting standards may be a useful area for HE QA professionals. Nowadays, many resort to the worldwide web. In this regard, Harris (1997) cautions that "information on the internet has many levels of quality and its reliability" and "it ranges from very good and very bad" (p. 1). Therefore, obtaining QA information from reliable sources on the internet should not be seen as problematic as long as they are reliable sources and are adapted to fit with the local contexts. Harman (1998a) notes that literature reporting the developments in HE QA points that there is a significant degree of borrowing by national systems of higher education from others. These procedures need to be adapted as well as adopted, which means they fit well within the culture of the particular system.

The importance of enforcing the standards cannot be overestimated. York (1999) states that relevant professional bodies which set standards are concerned with ensuring standards are upheld. However, when bodies other than professional bodies such as universities set standards, whether the standards are upheld is questionable (Pillay & Kimber, 2009). Pillay and Kimber's example of fluctuations in entry standards for Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery (MBBS) in Australian universities based on student ability to pay upfront fees can be seen as an example of universities setting their own standards.

The issue is compounded if the whole spectrum of academic freedom the universities enjoy in some countries under the power of self-accreditation is

considered. This implies that setting standards is not the ultimate objective in higher education institutions, but also monitoring and enforcing those standards is as important. It is also rational to think that if universities set their own standards, then quality assurance processes would weaken and nobody would enforce accountability on universities. Other areas of concern in this case may be transparency, which is a major reason for setting standards and, as discussed earlier in this section, a conflict of interest. Maintaining transparency and avoiding conflict of interest have particular relevance to Small States, where in many instances lack of resources make these issues commonplace.

Pillay and Kimber (2009) also argue that fluctuation of entry requirements is an indication of lack of clarity in determining how and who sets the minimum standards. For instance, the minimum standards are not safeguarded because different universities accepted different levels of entry requirements for a Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery (MBBS) degree. While standards are set in one way or another, flexibility, interpretation and implementation is always problematic. Minimum level of requirements should be the key focus in setting standards as any deviation from that may compromise minimum acceptable quality. The minimum level is normally demand-driven and related to employability of graduates by the job market (Afonso, Ramírez, & Díaz-Puente, 2012).

2.4.2.4 Standards and ranking.

In recent years, international ranking systems have been developed and are increasingly being used to judge the performance of universities. It is argued that university rankings disseminate important information to both public and private sectors on institutional performance and institutional status, which are two important areas of higher education (Marginson & Wende, 2009). Ranking studies draw a lot of public attention and it has become fashionable to produce world-wide lists of world class universities (Teichler, 2008). Nonetheless, it is perhaps one of the most controversial issues in today's quality research circle (Harvey, 2008; Schmidt, Hippel, & Tippelt, 2010). However, Marginson and Wende (2009) argue that league tables or ranking have a compelling popularity regardless of questions of validity. This assumes that popular products and services are of high quality, an assertion that is not always true. Therefore, the popularity argument positions the ranking approach alongside marketing agendas.

Furthermore, advocates of university ranking claim (e.g., Margrison & Wende, 2009; Teichler, 2008) that ranking studies provide transparency about individual institutions of higher education, which is often seen as a public need. The investment in HE made by the high ranking institutions is often equal to the national budget of many of the Small island States. The argument in support of ranking often quoted is that "publication of ranking lists promote a healthy competitive environment among institutions and scholars" (Teichler, 2008, p. 372). Others argue that "rankings have given a powerful impetus to both international and national competitive pressures and have the potential to change policy objectives and institutional behaviours" (Marginson & Wende, 2009, p. 122). Competition is good, but the indicators and standards of performance the universities are ranked against need to be more equal. This is difficult considering the fact that the baseline and investment capacities of universities vary extensively. Nevertheless, university ranking advocates have initiated two major global ranking lists of the Shanghai 'Academic ranking of world universities' and the World university rankings of the *Times Higher Education Supplement* (THES) (Harvey, 2008).

Given the controversy surrounding the ranking approach for QA in HE, there are others who caution HE stakeholders to a number of limitations and consequently misrepresent the quality measures. Most criticisms of rankings are based on methodological concerns. Teichler (2008) explains common methodological critiques with respect to international rankings:

- Measuring research quality objectively with the help of a number of publications and citations;
- Measuring research quality subjectively with the help of ratings undertaken by academic peers, or of measuring educational quality by students' rating of teachers' teaching quality; and
- Majority of ranking studies rely mostly on *input* and possibly *process criteria*, but are weak with respect to *output* criteria.

According to Teichler's observation of common methodological critiques of international rankings, a lot of attention is given to research as an indicator of quality. This may be undermining the quality of teaching as a major indicator and may have negative consequences to Small States, where a strong research base in

higher education is unlikely to be the case, especially compared to bigger nations. Another critique is relying too much on input data. It appears that the ranking studies do not use financial investment in higher education by universities and return on that investment as an indicator of performance. However, this could be an indicator of quality, especially when looking at quality as value for money, which is a major approach to quality by a growing number of higher education institutions.

Harvey (2008) has identified an array of other concerns. First, critics of ranking claim that publishers of ranking lists have applied the metaphor of league tables from the world of sport, which is not applicable to the complex system of higher education and research. The problem with using league tables as a ranking method is that it gives the impression that assessing a university's educational and scientific performance is as easy as assessing a football league. Second, some researchers raised the question of the validly of the indicators used for ranking. Third, how to deal with the issue of missing or unavailability of data, especially, for international comparisons, which can potentially distort rankings, have been found to be the case with both Shanghai ranking and THES ranking. Fourth, weightings of indicators in the rankings have been criticised to be disproportionate, subjective, arbitrary or unexplained with little or no theoretical or empirical basis. Furthermore, major methodological flaws such as significant changes in league position year after year, hardly reflect real changes in institutions and therefore raise doubts about the reliability of the ranking mechanism as a QA tool. Also, wide swings in the rankings can occur even without any significant change in the quality of the institutions because of the changes in the formula used to compile the index. Finally, rankings place institutions in order, often based on minute, statistically insignificant differences in scores. In addition to methodological concerns, the above mentioned critiques are also based on pragmatic, moral and philosophical concerns.

While rankings are supposed to measure standards for the quality of teaching and research programs, researchers such as Pillay and Kimber (2009 suggest that such standards should be developed according to the local context. They argue that measuring a vast majority of the world's higher education institutions against global benchmarks which may only suit the privileged few countries may undermine the excellent work many developing country universities are doing in their individual countries. Therefore, they argue that the quality indicators and standards should be

structured more against the local context and the professional practice and less against some distant international expectations. This argument has resonance in some other debates on rankings. One such example is the suggestion by Williams and Dyke (2007) that there is:

> the need to develop other measures of performance which have a more local focus, such as contributions to regional development, contributions to national well-being, and detailed evaluations of teaching performance that takes account the mix of students. (p. 838)

Such arguments about ranking studies, perhaps lead to the realisation that standards are a relative thing and it is important to understand how it may help develop a local/ national knowledge economy. Therefore, who sets the standards and in which context becomes important. If one considers "return on investment" then, instead of chasing a league table (Pillay & Kimber, 2009), focusing on teaching, scholarship and local research issues (Harvey, 2008) may in fact be a better option for developing countries, particularly the Small States. The huge investments required to reach any respectable level on these league tables may not be in the best interest of universities from Small States. However, there may be niche areas for research that favour Small States such as tropical marine studies—an example of such localised research initiative is the School of Marine Studies at the University of the South Pacific (University of the South Pacific, 2011).

2.4.2.5 Accountability of quality in HE.

Another issue emerging from the outset of these arguments is accountability. Accountability and quality assurance are seen as interrelated. In fact, Vidovich (2002) describes quality assurance as a "suite of accountability mechanisms" (p. 391). In that sense, QA is the process and accountability should be the outcome of that process. The QA system should be accountable for certain elements and to a certain authority or entity. The process of accountability should be embedded within the QA regulation so any undesirable practices can be dealt with some level of authority. If accountability is not enforced on universities, it is hard to see if quality assurance can be upheld (Pillay & Kimber, 2009). However, the notion that accountability is always linked to an authority (Jones, 2002) is not straightforward. That is, the nature of such an authority can be state or central governments, or professional boards or market driven authorities. Pillay and Kimber emphasise that it

can be problematic for higher education institutions operating across borders when it is not clear which authority to deal with in relation to enforcing minimum standards and upholding quality assurance principles.

The focus on accountability as a mechanism for quality assurance in higher education has lead to development of frameworks and guidelines by various international organisations (Pillay & Kimber, 2009). Nonetheless, Pillay and Kimber point to the fact that these international organisations lack legislative and regulatory authority to influence the quality assurance standards. However, Woodhouse (2010) suggests that the involvement of international networks in QA as *QA Internationalisation* in which the intent is to provide mutual support, and a forum for sharing ideas and good practices can be helpful in advocating self-regulated behaviour. Therefore, internationalisation of QA relates more to the methods of providing advice and guidance going beyond the QA national base. However, Woodhouse notes that the international QA networks have neither the mandate nor desire to control or direct QA agencies in any country. As a result, the question whether those international QA agencies have the authority and responsibility for quality assurance is raised.

In most countries, higher education is regarded as a national matter and it is national governments who are responsible for planning and providing higher education for its citizens. Therefore, quality assurance should be part of this national activity (Woodhouse, 2010). The assumption that national bodies, and not the international agencies, should be responsible to carry out the quality assurance may be a desired one. But more understanding of 'how' and 'who' from the national system is needed for this discussion.

Although, there is the almost universal notion of academic freedom, which ensures government regulation is never very directive, State regulation is preferred for quality assurance in some circumstances and traditions such as east and central Europe (King, 2007). Even Australia, under the Bradley report, is now balancing itself between self-regulation and external regulation through national legislation (Bradley et al., 2008). Also, King suggests that the interest and curiosity of the governments in the best regulatory mechanisms for both stimulating and controlling, is likely to be reinforced with the growth of for-profit and transnational higher education. King explains that a significant characteristic of this contemporary

regulatory system is formal guidelines. These formal guidelines usually include detailed codes, benchmarks and frameworks.

Such regulation by governments does not mean that quality assurance bodies are to be influenced or controlled by the government. In fact, it is recommended (ENQA, 2006) that these bodies to be independent of both government ministries as well as higher education institutions. As noted earlier in this document, the current trend in quality assurance is heading towards a single one-tier system, in which the independent national agency is responsible for accreditation as well as for audit processes (ENQA, 2006). This arrangement in fact becomes an integrated system rather than fragmented agencies operating independently with little consultations. At the same time, such system conforms to the systems approach, in which all the elements and relationships are organised in a systemic way. This approach is becoming popular in Europe, and has also been recommended as a model for future Australian quality assurance systems (Bradley et al., 2008; Commonwealth of Australia, 2009). Having a single national body could also be suitable for Small State contexts in the sense that instead of spending limited national resources for many agencies, utilising one agency may yield better outcomes.

More recently, legal frameworks have been used to strengthen operational independence of the HE quality assurance agencies. Most European countries use legal frameworks such as legislative acts for this purpose. These legal frameworks should give a clear description of the role and functions of the statutory bodies. However, as much as these frameworks give strength in terms of regulatory authority to quality assurance agencies, they should also allow a certain degree of flexibility in the development and operation of the agency (ENQA, 2006). Examples can be drawn from the ISO 9000 standards in which some elements are more contextual and local but there are also global standards which are non-negotiable (Nadvi & Waltring, 2004).

Though there is a clear distinction between standards and quality assurance, there is also a strong link or reliance on each other. This reliance is evident in the fact that quality assurance process is about making sure the academic provider and the programs offered meet the prescribed standards (Manyaga, 2008). The relationship between the standards and quality assurance is crucial and it emphasises the systemic characteristics in a holistic system of quality assurance in higher education.

According to systems theory, all relationships between different elements of a system are important for the systemic functioning of a system. Therefore, in this case, without standards, it is hard to see how quality assurance mechanisms function to a reasonable level.

2.4.3 QA within HE models.

2.4.3.1 Quality assurance models around the world.

This section analyses different models of quality assurance for higher education adopted around the world. There is a rich variety of quality assurance arrangements in Western, Central and Eastern Europe (Lewis, 2009). However, this research focused on the models that can contribute most to conceptualising a model for Small States.

In the 1980s, higher education systems experienced a variety of mechanisms of quality assurance (Harman, 1996). While some countries in Europe and the United States developed their own quality assurance mechanisms built on different cultural and ideological traditions, other countries borrowed models from abroad and adopted these systems to meet local needs and traditions (Harman, 1998b). This indicates the localised nature of quality assurance systems around the world. In this sense, the localised nature of a higher education QA system means relevance of the system to that particular country. How to localise the higher education QA systems in Small States, is still an issue to be explored.

In order to understand the dynamics of quality assurance models, key issues related to quality assurance models will be investigated in this section looking at different variables and relationships. This includes: discussion of QA models from an historic perspective; understanding contributing factors to the growth of QA in higher education; exploring the underlying factors in QA models; identifying major concepts in QA in higher education; and looking at the QA models found in Small States.

HE QA models from an historic perspective.

Quality assurance models for higher education can be traced back to medieval times (Van Vught & Westerheijden, 1994). Van Vught and Westerheijden identified two extreme models for quality assessment in higher education. Referring to their historical backgrounds, he called one model the *French model* of vesting control in

an external authority. He called the other model the *English model* of a self-governing community of fellows.

The French model illustrated the dominance of the bishop and the chancellor of the Cathedral of Notre-Dame over the quality of higher education in the early thirteenth century. Despite the dramatic struggle for autonomy by the University of Paris for autonomy, the Chancellor of Notre-Dame as the delegate of the bishop of Paris, claimed the authority to grant or withhold the teaching licence and also claimed the right to decide control the contents of studies (Van Vught & Westerheijden, 1994). This approach to licensing may have served the French well in medieval times as one way of ensuring quality. However, the frequency of review of the licence is critical to ensuring enduring quality. If it is a one-off event, then it is a regulatory function rather than full fledged quality assurance.

The English model in medieval times was characterised by the dominance of the so called masters (or experts group of professionals/academics) at the medieval Universities of Cambridge and Oxford, who aspired to become completely independent of external jurisdiction (Van Vught & Westerheijden, 1994). Van Vught and Westerheijden note that as a result, medieval English colleges enjoyed self-governing status and as the masters decided the contents of the studies and the admission criteria.

Van Vught and Westerheijden (1994) suggest the French model as the archetype of the quality assurance in terms of accountability, because the power over the content of studies and the admission of students was in the hands of an external authority. The English model is, however, the origin of modern day quality assessment by means of peer review (Van Vught & Westerheijden, 1994). The French system is external, which can be expensive, and the English system is self-serving. An optimum model would be a combination of these two systems. Today, there are higher education QA systems which have both internal and external elements of quality assurance, such as the systems in Australia, where universities are self-accrediting, but are also subject to an external quality audit by the Australian Universities Quality Agency (Bradley et al., 2008).

Though many quality assurance systems and the agencies that implement them found in many countries are quite recent, there are few exceptions, which are older than 50 years. These older systems are found in the United Kingdom and the United

States. In these two countries, the state was not controlling the day-to-day operations of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (Lewis, 2009). In other words, Higher Education Institutions in the UK and the US enjoy a strong autonomy (Van Damme, 2000). Therefore, these two countries had the perceived need for a system of external quality assurance, other than the internal quality mechanisms inherent at HEIs (Lewis, 2009).

Converged models.

The quality assurance systems we see today around the world have hallmarks of bigger systems. Member countries of the British Commonwealth generally adapted the British system of accreditation. In the meantime, the US system of quality assurance, characterised with a high degree of institutional autonomy driven by a large element of coordination through market mechanisms (Harman, 1996), has been borrowed and copied by numerous countries in Asia, the Pacific, Latin America and Eastern Europe (Van Damme, 2000). However, this direct borrowing has to be carried out with great care due to the different historical background and cultural setting in which the QA system exist (Wolf, 1993).

Japan and the Philippines established their formal accreditation agencies after the Second World War. The systems in these two countries had been modelled largely on the US system. Though the United Kingdom is credited with having quality assurance systems since Medieval times (Van Vught & Westerheijden, 1994), the first formal quality assurance body in the United Kingdom was the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA), which was set up in 1965 (Lewis, 2009).

External quality assurance agencies emerged in a few countries including France, Jamaica, The Netherlands, Republic of Ireland and Hong Kong in the 1980s, but the real increase in such bodies occurred in mid 1990s. The International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) has 154 QA agencies as members, from 78 countries, as of July 2008 (Lewis, 2009). The INQAAHE membership numbers are probably an indication of the growth of QA and increases of agencies around the World.

2.4.3.2 Major processes in QA in higher education.

A discussion of the key processes used in quality assurance is presented separately in the following few sections. The two main functions related to quality

assurance models or approaches are accreditation and academic audit. These processes apply to both institutional and program level. All other concepts are, in one way or another, either part of these or related. Accreditation is generally perceived as an element for quality control. On the other hand, an element of quality improvement is seen in academic audits (ENQA, 2006).

Registration.

In some OECD member countries like Australia, where renewed efforts are being made to strengthen the overall HE QA system, registration of HEIs is being treated at the same level as accreditation as a major QA function. According to the TEQSA Act, HEIs cannot operate unless they are registered (Office of Legislative Drafting and Publishing, 2011). In this Australian HE QA regime, the registration is given no more than 7 years and after that period the HEIs have to renew their registration. It is important to note the period of licence to operate may differ from country to country. Ideally, in Australia, the HEIs have to submit their programs for accreditation concurrently with their application for registration. This is because accreditation of at least one course is a condition of registration together with meeting what is called threshold standards. In the Australian system, universities are often granted the status of 'self-accrediting authority' (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency [Australian Government], 2013). Though self-accrediting authority status is granted after an application process, the registration, as well other QA processes, such as accreditation mostly focus on non-university providers.

Apart from registration of local institutions, in many countries, there seems to be a focus on cross-border providers. In most cases, such as in Hong Kong, the foreign providers are also subject to registration even if it is in collaboration with local providers (McBurnie & Ziguras, 2001). There is a shift in some countries in the way foreign and private providers are registered. Until recently, such decisions in countries like Malaysia were often "within the discretionary power of the minister" (Shah, Lewis, & Fitzgerald, 2011, p. 254). However, Shah, Lewis and Fitzgerald note that in an effort to ensure consistency, registration of all private HEIs were placed under one regulatory agency later in Malaysia. In Australia and Malaysia as well as Hong Kong, it seems that the authorities are more concerned about ensuring the registration of private as well as non-university providers rather than public and universities. This could be due to the exponential increase in private providers, which

are overwhelmingly for-profit providers in recent times. Also, it could be that public HEIs as well universities, which are often given more self-autonomy as in Australia, are more trusted by the QA agencies (see also Section 2.3.3 – Increase in the number of private higher education providers).

Accreditation.

Accreditation is often described as a process by which a quality assurance body evaluates a Higher Education Institution as a whole or a specific academic program against a pre-determined minimum criteria or standards (Vlăsceanu et al., 2007). This is either done when first entering into the local market or there may be periodic reviews required to provide extension of the accreditation period. In some countries, accreditation refers to initial licensing (as is the case in Australia) where audits refer to a continuous process of assessment of programs and institutions. Evaluation of an institution is usually called "institutional accreditation". On the other hand, evaluation of a program is referred to as "program accreditation" (ENQA, 2006). The accreditation process usually results in awarding a status (yes/no decision), recognition, or a licence to operate an institution or a license to deliver a certain program within a valid period of time. (Vlăsceanu et al., 2007). In some national contexts, accreditation can be confused for approval, as both program accreditation and institutional accreditation are also referred to initial approval process of a program or institution such as the case in Australia (Bradley et al., 2008; Commonwealth of Australia, 2009).

To a large extent, initial accreditation procedures coincide with the procedural devices employed for on-going institutional audit (Kohler, 2003). The accreditation process generally consists of three specific steps: (1) self-evaluation/assessment process conducted by the higher education institution seeking accreditation, resulting in a report that is based on a set of standards and criteria of the accrediting body, (2) *a* study visit conducted by a team of peers or external assessors selected by the accrediting body, resulting in an assessment report, including a recommendation to the accrediting body; (3) final decision by the accrediting body whether or not to give accreditation after examination of evidence and recommendation by the external assessors on the basis of the given set of criteria concerning quality (Van Vught & Westerheijden, 1994; Vlăsceanu et al., 2007). While there are an increasing number of foreign courses offered in developing countries including Small States,

accreditation of those courses in recipient countries is an issue to be addressed. Often such courses are not subject to the usual rigorous accreditation by recipient countries and accepted on the premise that the provider is from a developed country and thus the course should be of acceptable quality

Program accreditation is, as discussed above, an important tool for higher education institutions to acquire recognition for their programs (Jeliazkova & Westerheijden, 2002). In the US system, program accreditation normally applies to programs as well as departments or schools that are parts of an institution. In India, the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) adopts institutional accreditation as it considers assessing academic programs of more than 12000 institutions of higher education is not feasible (Botha, 2005). Likewise, when there is an array of international programs, virtual and off-shore teaching, the challenge it brings to the QA systems, especially in Small States who are not well equipped with formal QA mechanisms is enormous.

Institutional accreditation refers to the evaluation of a whole institution, including all its programs, sites, and method delivery (Vlăsceanu et al., 2007) to determine whether the institution in question has appropriate and credible structures and mechanisms in place to ensure quality of its programs (ENQA, 2006). While institutional accreditation is carried out on a systematic, cyclical basis in some countries such as India (Stella, 2004), it takes place on an ad hoc basis in some other countries (ENQA, 2006). These differences may be due to contextual differences in various countries and regions.

Institutional accreditation in higher education is where an accreditation body seeks evidence of successful practice before it grants accreditation status and may include a number of areas. These areas often include (1) mission and objectives and (2) governance and administration, management of QA and improvement, learning and teaching, student administration and support services, learning resources, physical facilities, financial planning and management, faculty and staff employment processes, research, and institutional relationship with community (Onsman, 2010).

Institutional accreditation is relevant in three situations. First, institutional accreditation is crucial when a new institution is established and applies for approval to offer academic programs. Second, institutional accreditation may help decision-making when an institution applies for an elevated institutional status. In a number of

countries, lower level institutes usually strive to become either colleges or in some cases universities. Third, periodic audits are carried out to maintain quality through continuous review of institutions and programs. Another situation requiring audits may be where the institution's repeated failures in obtaining program accreditation raise concerns about credibility (ENQA, 2006).

Academic audit.

An academic audit is a process of reviewing either an academic institution or program that is primarily focused on its accountability (Vlăsceanu et al., 2007). Vlăsceanu et al. explain that an academic audit determines if the stated aims and objectives in terms of curriculum, staff infrastructure and other objectives are met. The most widely practiced form of audit is an institutional audit as it is used as an external review process of higher education institutions by leading countries such as Australia (Bradley et al., 2008; Commonwealth of Australia, 2009), the UK (Hoecht, 2006; Lewis, 2009) and Europe (Gvaramadze, 2008; Van Damme, 2000). Some refer to the external review of institutions as "external evaluation" or "external quality assurance" (Stella, 2004).

Vlăsceanu et al (2007, p. 31) define institutional audit as "an evidence-based process carried out through peer review that investigates the procedures and the mechanisms by which an institution ensures its quality assurance and quality enhancement". This may sound similar to accreditation but, as discussed in the previous section, in most countries accreditation is given for a period of time. This is not the case in an audit. Also, a yes/ no decision is not involved in academic audit. Van Damme (2000) concurs that quality audit is typically a methodology and goes on to argue that it is used more widely in countries where the institutions have significant autonomy. He further argues that in this case, audit is a meta-review of the functioning of the quality control mechanisms usually carried out by a government body. While Van Damme's argument is sound, he is looking at a very traditional government-controlled system. Nowadays, bigger countries are moving to more independent systems outside of the sphere of the direct government control (ENQA, 2006).

Jeliazkova and Westerheijden (2001) claim that a close look at the quality assurance systems leads to "the phase model", which is also referred to as the "four stage model". Lewis (2009) claims that an analysis of the database of the

INQAAHE[1] in 2008, indicates that virtually all agencies adopt the same overall approach for institutional audit which has the following four stages:

- *A self-study* (sometimes called *self-evaluation*) carried out by the institution in the light of guidelines and regulations issued by the quality assurance agency;
- The appointment of a *peer group* or *external experts*, whose review of the institution or program would start with a review of the self-evaluation report;
- *Site visits* by the external experts, involving meetings with senior academic and administrative staff and students. The visit enables the external experts to review and inspect the premises, relevant specialist equipment, and the actual teaching and learning process through attendance at lectures and classes or the inspection of students' work; and
- *A public report* or the publication of the decision or recommendation of the agency (Jeliazkova & Westerheijden, 2001; Lewis, 2009; Van Vught & Westerheijden, 1994).

However, it is important to note that there are many variations in this model (Jeliazkova & Westerheijden, 2001; Van Vught & Westerheijden, 1994) and its applications (Lewis, 2009). These steps are also used for accreditation. However, the difference is that there is no decision making in audit procedures.

The four-stage model appears to be popular, as Jeliazkova and Westerheijden (2001) claim that most national quality assurance systems are designed around this model. Bornmann's (2006) "multi-stage evaluation procedure" has only three stages: (1) internal self-assessment, (2) external evaluation, and (3) follow-up. Though Bornmann's model has three stages only, it has additional follow-up procedures.

Despite the positive reviews of these institutional audit processes, they are not spared of criticism. Questions are raised about whether the institutional audit or external quality assurance has actually improved quality in higher education. Though

[1] International Network of Quality Assurance agencies in Higher Education

Kristensen (2010) agrees that institutional audit with all its processes gives the institution under review a lot of useful information, she argues that this effect will be highly dependent on how well developed the internal quality culture is of that particular institution. The other concern raised by Kristensen is with the quality and suitability of the peers who are in the team of external experts who carry out external evaluation of the institutions. She claims that even though the peers are experts in a certain discipline, they do not have the competencies needed for doing academic auditing. This leads to inadequate dialogue between the peers and the staff at the scrutinised institution. Another issue is the outcome of audit reports; whether the institutions that do not meet the requirements are closed or given a period of time to correct and a follow-up audit is conducted. It is interesting to point out that in the ISO 9000 model, which has a worldwide reputation, follow-up corrective actions are mandatory if the accreditation is to be continued. The reforms are expected to be carried out promptly after the audit and problems observed and improvements recommended need to be complied with (Berghe, 1997).

Some countries as explained above, conduct academic audit periodically as a requirement for all HEIs. This type of academic audit is widely practiced in European countries under the umbrella of Bologna Process (Bernardino & Marques, 2009). One example is the Netherlands where academic audit, which is called institutional audit, is carried out with same stages starting with self-assessment and then with two external visits by a panel of external experts followed by the audit report as well as a final decision (Accreditation Organisation of Netherlands and Flanders [NVAO], 2013). While accreditation takes place at the program level and focuses on the education provided; in some cases academic audits also called institutional quality assurance assessment in the Netherlands, "bolsters an institution-wide internal quality culture" (Accreditation Organisation of Netherlands and Flanders [NVAO], 2011, p. 4).

The recent changes in the Australian HE QA system introduced an overhaul of the previous academic audit process of each institution which was carried out by the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) on a five yearly cycle (Edwards, 2012). Edwards notes that this is a shift from AUQA's time-based model to an output and standards-focused system where the model is risk-based and proportionate. This is possibly a reference to TEQSA's ad-hoc approach for academic audits which are

now called compliance assessments, accreditation assessments (Office of Legislative Drafting and Publishing, 2011) as well as quality assessments (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency [Australian Government], 2013). In this new approach for academic audits, in the name of compliance assessments, quality assessments and accreditation assessments, not every HEI is reviewed and there is no cyclical audit process for each HEI. Instead, according to the TEQSA legislation, under the compliance assessments, the Australian HE QA agency TEQSA has the authority to "review or examine any aspect of an entity's operations to assess whether a registered higher education provider continues to meet the Threshold Standards" (Office of Legislative Drafting and Publishing, 2011). On the other hand, quality assessments focus on a particular area of interest or concern (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency [Australian Government], 2013, p. 45). In addition to these two types of assessments, accreditation assessment processes allow the TEQSA to have a continuous process of review and assessment of already accredited courses.

2.5 DIFFERENT AGENDAS IN QA LITERATURE

There are various international as well as regional players actively involved in researching and supporting development of quality assurance of higher education. A detailed discussion of activities of some of these agencies is presented later in this section. Different bodies seem to be focusing on promoting and developing different agendas linked to internationalisation of higher education. Morey (2004) identified globalisation of economic, cultural, political and intellectual institutions along with interdependence of nations as major forces for global change in higher education. So what drives this phenomenon of globalisation?

Crystal (1997) noted that globalisation or internationalisation is driven by innovation in information and communication technologies (ICT), and mass air travel underpinned by growing dominance of English as the common language of business, politics and science. However, Healey (2008) argues that "universities have always been internationalised, exchanging ideas through international academic conferences, books and journals, sharing faculty and ensuring both research and teaching conforms to the present knowledge base as it is internationally understood." That type of internationalisation does not appear to be inviting much criticism. However, Healy identified internalisation of *student body* rather than

internationalisation of either the faculty or research/teaching as the factor for universities being seen more and more commercial in nature. This can be linked as well to the increase in cross-border higher education, which is a key interest of UNSESCO (UNESCO, 2005).

Globalisation is linked to the emergence of new arrangements in higher education such as virtual universities, off-shore provision of higher education, twinning programs as well as online education (Pillay & Kimber, 2009). Internationalisation is sometimes termed 'transnational education', which also includes distance learning (Healey, 2008). Pillay and Kimber argue that these new developments, coupled with lack of physical presence, poses difficulties for importing countries to regulate accreditation and licensing and, consequently, ensuring quality and authenticity. Globalisation, therefore, brings new opportunities (UNESCO, 2005) as well as challenges to higher education in general and to quality assurance in particular (Kristoffersen & Lindeberg, 2004; Stella, 2006).

Emergence of new delivery models and cross-border providers in higher education such as campuses abroad, electronic delivery of higher education and for-profit providers led to the development of UNESCO 'Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education' (UNESCO, 2005). These guidelines are also referred to as a joint venture of UNSCO-OECD (Stella, 2006). UNESCO outlined that the guidelines' main purpose is to protect students and other stakeholders from low quality provision and disreputable providers. The effectiveness and relevance of such guidelines by an international body, instead of national QA bodies is a debatable issue (Blackmur, 2007).

Some researchers started raising major questions in relation to international guidelines. For example, Pillay and Kimber (2009) raise the issue that the role of such bodies in quality assurance may be minimal as the national bodies always have direct influence or control over their affairs. It is also important to note that merely having guidelines does not protect students, but enforcement of those guidelines does, which requires legislation.

Another cross-border agency for higher education quality assurance is the European Association of Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). While ENQA is heavily influenced by the Bologna Declaration of 1999, in which the European Ministers of Education committed themselves to establishing the European

Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010, their prime goal is to develop comparable criteria and methodologies as well as easily comparable degrees, a common European system of credits and mobility of students and teachers (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), 2010). In fact, EHEA was launched in March 2010 (Bologna Process - European Higher Education Area, 2010). These ideas influenced by the Bologna Process look very impressive and have great impact on higher education QA systems in Europe. However, Bologna Process may be difficult to implement as some countries in Europe such as the UK, Germany, and the Netherlands have their own national bodies that moderate programs and give equivalent credits for international qualifications. Amaral and Magalhães (2004) point out that there are obvious difficulties and disagreements at the level of implementation of the Bologna Process. Amaral and Magalhães also highlight some of the negative effects of the Bologna Process such as the possible loss of institutional autonomy and emergence of a new centralised European higher education bureaucracy. A further disadvantage is the possible decrease in the diversity of European higher education systems. These European examples may be useful in developing higher education QA systems for Small States. Often Small States are invited to take part in similar regional and international convergence initiatives such as Asia Pacific Quality Network (APQN), INQAAHE, COL's VUSSC TQF, and Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM). How much importance and prominence is given to local context and how much thought is given by these networks to preserve the already existing higher education diversity in Small States is critical. Especially, one has to consider the diversity, strength and weaknesses of Small States in terms of resource levels, relations between higher education and the labour market, approaches to system-level planning and resource allocation, and experimentation and reform (Harman, 1996). Harman suggests that Small States are acknowledged as less resourced compared to bigger nations.

Related to the Bologna Process is the endeavour to create a European Qualifications Framework (EQF), which was adopted by the European Parliament and Council on 23 April 2008, to act as a translation device to make national qualifications more readable across Europe, promoting workers' and learners' mobility between countries and facilitating their lifelong learning (European Commission, 2010). This is an effective concept if implemented, but there are

questions on how to accredit and recognise subjects in different languages and for different demands. These are challenges for developing and implementing a higher education QA system. Similar challenges lie ahead for Small States as the same barriers of language and varying demands exist.

The Commonwealth of Learning is also working to promote virtual higher education by developing the first Transnational Qualifications Framework (TQF) in the world. Like EQF, TQF is also a translation instrument to provide momentum for the transfer of courses, qualifications and learners between countries by providing a means through which qualification frameworks could be compared and related (Allgoo et al., 2010). The significance and relevance of TQF to this study is that TQF is targeted – from its inception – for Small States (of Commonwealth). While TQF together with VUSSC is a platform to transfer courses among Small States of Commonwealth, it does not offer a comprehensive QA solution for Small States. Perhaps one of the positive aspects of TQF in this regard is that it encourages development of higher education QA systems within 32 Small States of Commonwealth (Allgoo et al., 2010).

While most of the higher education QA bodies strive to assure quality of higher education providers, there are some bodies which function as networks for national quality assurance bodies; some regional and some global. While INQAAHE, UNESCO/OECD and COL are regarded as notable global organisations that are actively engaged in higher education QA, there are regional bodies in different stages of development such as APQN, CARICOM. Stella (2006) argues that while *UNESCO/OECD Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education* cover only one aspect of higher education, which is standards for cross-border higher education, *Guidelines of Good Practice* (GGP) of INQAAHE and *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG) of ENQA covers quality assurance of both national and transnational operations. Stella also noted that while GGP addresses only quality assurance bodies, ESG addresses both the institutions and national quality assurance agencies. It ensures inclusion of standards and guidelines for both internal quality assurance within higher education institutions and external quality assurance agencies. It is important to note that these are guidelines which are non-binding.

The INQAAHE appear to be broader than other agencies (International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), 2010), which have vested interest in promoting good practice for internal and/or external quality assurance among External Quality Assurance Agencies (EQAAs), through its ESG (International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), 2009). INQAAHE's global coverage (Woodhouse, 2004) is evident in its growth from 20 to more than 200 members, including 145 quality assurance agencies which are full members from countries in all continents. However, with this wide scope of INQAAHE, the effectiveness of the organisation in terms of implementation of its good practice guidelines by members remains to be seen.

Though these various organisations and bodies have differences in their approach and focus, they have some similar agendas. Almost all are interested in promoting mutual recognition of qualifications and facilitating mobility of workforce across regions. However, even though there are signs of mutual recognition and understanding to some extent; these arrangements do not guarantee recognition of qualifications and mobility of workforce among nations as they are legally not binding. While some bodies, such as ENQA have an ambitious economic agenda behind such interests, others, such as INQAAHE appear to have a more direct interest in improving the quality of higher education service provision. INQAAHE's quality assurance goal is evident in ENQA's constitution, in which the main purpose of the Network is to collect and disseminate information on current best practice and develop theory and practice in the assessment, improvement and maintenance of quality in higher education with a host of other purposes by means of this information sharing (International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education, 2011). On the other hand, ENQA's economic agenda stems from the Lisbon Strategy by which Europe aims to achieve the aspiration of becoming the most dynamic and knowledge-based economy in the World (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), 2009).

The review of the QA literature in this section shows the effect of globalisation of higher education and the subsequent involvement of different organisations in promoting their regional or global interests. The most active regional QA network, which has a global influence beyond their region, is the European Association of Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). ENQA's well-known Bologna

Process and European Qualifications Framework (EQF)'s influence is becoming evident in many QA systems in HE around the world. There are other regional QA networks, in Asia, Africa, and Caribbean with many Small States as members, but these networks appear to still be in the development stage.

2.6 QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION WITHIN SMALL STATES

The literature has revealed that only a few studies have explored the status of the quality assurance in higher education in Small States. Consequently, there is a lack of information on quality assurance development in Small States (Stella, 2010). One of the few studies on Small States in regard to quality assurance in higher education is the "INQAAHE Project on Small States: Situational Analysis on Quality assurance in Small States" (Stella, 2010). The INQAAHE study was carried out in the form of a survey and was administered to 45 Small States that had a population of less than 1.5 million and four other large States of Botswana, Jamaica, Lesotho and Namibia. Therefore, based on the INQAAHE project, this study will focus on exploring the situation of quality assurance in Small States, in terms of elements that appear to be key to a higher education QA regulatory system, addressed throughout the literature review in this chapter.

2.6.1 Regulatory framework.

INQAAHE study has highlighted the fact that Small States have only come into the higher education quality assurance picture during the last decade. This is probably the reason why the structures of quality assurance of Small States are still evolving. While the global trend is to have dedicated units or independent statutory agencies for quality assurance, Small States have an equal spread of all options – a dedicated agency for QA; a unit within the ministry; integrated attention to QA through other ministerial functions (Stella, 2010). Stella points out that Small States with dedicated QA agencies include Jamaica (University Council of Jamaica) and Trinidad and Tobago (National Accreditation Council of Trinidad and Tobago). While this may be the case for some Small States, for many of them, it could be challenging to set up fully-functioning higher education quality assurance agencies due to lack of human resources.

Similarly, a study of quality assurance governance systems in Small States of Commonwealth conducted by Keevy et al. (2008) showed that most Small States have a strong, central national quality assurance body which is under the direct control of the government. However, Keevy et al. suggest that such tight centralised control of quality assurance has been criticised because it could become excessively bureaucratic and may create an environment of cynicism and risk alienation of key stakeholders, such as higher education institutions, academics and students. As discussed in Section 2.4.3, the most well regarded alternative option in the recent literature is a strong national statutory agency independent of both ministries and higher education institutions.

Another finding in the INQAAHE study was the slow progress from the passing of legislation to the QA agency/ unit becoming operational (Stella, 2010). Stella argues that this inefficiency in implementing plans in Small States is an indication that QA is yet to receive attention in those countries. She also states that the view of the respondents to the survey used for the INQAAHE study, was slow progress due to the inadequate resource base (human resource and finance).

2.6.2 Standards and guidelines of quality assurance.

One of the 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, it 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 the lack of policies identifying the consequences for compliance or non-compliance with QA requirements. Another example is policy gaps in addressing emerging issues such as setting and managing QA standards for transnational education as well as online and distance learning education (Stella, 2010).

According to Jackson's (1998) definition of standards, as discussed in Section 2.2.3, standards can define expectations and requirements. For instance, qualification 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 (Education & (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.

NQFs in Small States try to give attention to student assessment and learning outcomes, which are also common issues of quality assurance (Stella, 2010). Indeed, there are examples of QA agencies taking up NQF roles in many countries, such as Malaysia and Hong Kong. This requires, as Stella argues, a single entity to take up two roles and is an example of an integrated system of quality assurance, which is more suitable for Small States, so that available resources can be better utilised within one system instead of scatted units. The opposite sometimes occurs for some Small States, where NQF bodies turn into QA bodies and implement QA functions with it. In both approaches, the outcome is to transform the QA agency to a more coherent and well defined system, where the relationships are well connected. The synthesis between agencies becomes useful. However, the important point here is not the process of synthesising, but the exchange of ideas between two standard setting bodies and the people involved in quality assurance.

2.6.3 QA of service delivery within higher education.

Stella (2010) states that in many Small States, higher education institutions have played an important role in steering their country's QA arrangements. Stella elaborates by giving two prominent examples: University of the West Indies (UEI) and the University of the South Pacific (USP). These universities have developed their own internal quality assurance mechanisms. This information, however, does not provide an overall picture of quality assurance in terms of accreditation and institutional audit, which are usually two of the key functions of a QA agency.

Whilst, studies which focus on quality assurance functions in Small States are rare, some individual papers on separate elements of QA systems do exist. A review of these selected studies (Keevy et al., 2008; Stella, 2010) show regional trends. For instance, Small States in the Caribbean offer relatively similar quality assurance services to each other (Accreditation Council of Trinad and Tobago, n.d.; Barbados Accreditation Council, 2010; University Council of Jamaica, 2011), and the island nations in the Indian Ocean have some common characteristics (Mohamedbhai,

2006; Seychelles Qualifications Authority, 2008). While the Small States in the Pacific have adopted some recent efforts to develop the quality assurance systems, the services offered are not as comprehensive as in Caribbean and Indian Ocean countries (Samoa Qualifications Authority, 2011; Vanuatu National Training Council, 2004).

The Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) of Mauritius has taken quality to mean "fitness for purpose", which is effectiveness of the institution to fulfil its stated goals as well as "fitness of purpose", which is the responsiveness of the institution to national socio-economic needs (Mohamedbhai, 2006). Mohamedbhai suggests that one of the fundamental principles of TEC is to make higher education institutions responsible for developing internal quality assurance systems. This is particularly important and economically more viable when there is only one university or HE institution in a country. However, where there is more than one institution, a body external to the institutions is required. Mohamedbhai explains that TEC's strategy of strengthening internal quality assurance systems of higher education institutions is used to facilitate institutional audit which starts with a self-assessment carried out by the concerned institution. It then follows with a visit by an external audit panel. The audit panel then prepares a report with recommendations and the institution is expected to act accordingly. This is the same procedure used globally for institutional audit or external quality assurance – as discussed in section 2.4.4. TEC also adopted another approach to assure HE quality, which is registration of institution and accreditation of programs, but this is targeted for private institutions mainly. In the absence of any other model to regulate private and transnational HE providers this model seems to be effective. Seychelles – another Indian Ocean state, appears to have borrowed some ideas from the Mauritius quality assurance system in regard to accreditation, but it is characterised by its small scale of operations (Seychelles Qualifications Authority, 2008), which is also the case with the Maldives quality assurance systems (Houston & Maniku, 2005). Having to provide these services of audit and accreditation without proper policies, standards and guidelines and without adequate human resources pose challenges and difficulties for Small States. Therefore, these shortcomings need to be addressed in any proposed model for higher education quality assurance for Small States.

Another example of a Small State developing their own quality assurance system is Samoa. Samoa and Mauritius are similar in the approach to quality assurance, in the sense that both of these systems have a focus at two levels; institutional and national. Another similarity is both systems use programs accreditation and institutional audit (Mohamedbhai, 2006; Samoa Qualifications Authority, 2011). According to TEC's guidelines of self-assessment and academic audit, they check information for the context of institutions, curriculum development and course assessment, students, feedback from students and alumni, staff perceptions, staff development, external perceptions, resources, research, quality assurance (within the institution), and transformation and responses to change (Tertiary Education Commission [Mauritius], 2010).

However, in Jamaica, the University Council of Jamaica carries out both program and institutional accreditation; but it does not conduct institutional audit of higher education institutions (University Council of Jamaica, 2011). Trinidad and Tobago are similar, where both program and institutional accreditation is used for quality assurance along with assessment of qualifications, conferment of titles to institutions or institutional status for higher education institutions such as 'university' or 'college', quality enhancement through on-going research and activities that promote adherence to standards, building institutional capacity and dissemination of best practices, registration of institutions and qualifications, and registration of institutions (Accreditation Council of Trinad and Tobago, n.d.). Similarly, in Barbados, registration, accreditation, recognition of qualifications and articulation and conferral of institutions titles are the main services provided by the BAC (Barbados Accreditation Council, 2010). It is important to note that Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago and Barbados are Caribbean countries with similar systems, structure and services to each other. Their similarity is shown in the adoption of the same systems for registration, accreditation, and recognition of qualifications as discussed above.

Therefore, when analysing quality assurance systems, it is more important to discuss whose interests the quality assurance system serves, particularly with the growing transnational providers entering the HE sector, instead of focusing on just defining quality (Luckett, 2007). As noted by Pillay (2009), quality is a relative term and it is important to understand quality for whom and of what as central to our

understanding of the evolving higher education sector. In a similar way, Langfeldt (2010), in search of making the purpose of HE providers transparent, has identified interrelated purposes for quality assurance activities. These purposes include (1) ensuring that HEIs fulfil required standards; (2) QA as basis for assigning institutional program accreditation; (3) QA for closing down substandard programs; and (4) QA for informing students and other stakeholders about the quality of institutions.

While these objectives may address potential needs of a higher education QA system which is influenced by external factors, the way local QA bodies perform these activities may also have a significant impact on the outcome of QA processes. Such is the case with determining acceptable standards, setting those standards and the benchmarks used by local QA agencies.

2.7 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR A QA SYSTEM

The critical review of relevant literature in this chapter serves as a platform for proposing a framework for conceptualising and analysing this research. The questions informing the study have been outlined in Chapter One and subsequently elaborated in Chapter Two to explore the key elements, attributes and regulatory mechanisms of a robust QA mechanism in higher education and propose a quality assurance model for Small States. This section will present a conceptual framework to synthesise the review and discussion presented above.

This section first explores the concept of systems theory in the light of available literature, in order to rationalise the conceptual framework of this study. A system may have different variables within a system which are connected based on priority of significance, which in turn triggers various relationships between the variables. By exploring the key elements, this section unpacks the various key variables and their relationships within a system and how they can make a system transparent and subsequently more accountable. This general discussion on system theory is followed by a discussion of key individual variables associated with the HE QA. The conceptual framework then presents as the end product of convergence of the theoretical/conceptual issues, including variables and relationships of systems theory, and HE QA variables and their relationships.

2.7.1 Systems theory.

Systems theory was initially used to conceptualise quality assurance in the manufacturing sector. However, the systems movement was conceptualised by Bertalanffy long before that and has been regarded as an important part of today's scientific thinking (Guberman, 2002). Guberman argues that the reason for this phenomenon is that since General System Theory (GST) as described by Ludwig von Bertalanffy has created an environment that promotes the will to work on complicated problems. Therefore, it has potential for application to QA models in higher education which also has a number of variables many of which may operate simultaneously at different levels. The need for this approach was recognised by Von Bertalanffy who understood the limitations of the traditional, linear scientific approach. This drive of systems theory set out to: (1) view the whole instead of parts, (2) understand the interactions and interrelations of the parts within a system, with other systems and with the environment, and (3) deal with increased number of variables and complexity (Irving, 1999).

Walonick (1993) argues that systems approach provides a common method for the study of societal and organisational patterns. A system can be physical, abstract or both and systems are said to consist of four things: (1) the objects – parts, elements or variables within the system, (2) attributes, (3) internal relationships among its objects and (4) environment (University of Twente, 2013). Pidwirny (2006b) defined systems as a collection of interrelated parts that work together by way of some driving process. Systems theory, while it has a common set of principles, has accumulated a large number of definitions derived by its use in different contexts which use different lexicons (Guberman, 2002). This is perhaps an indication of the versatility of the theory.

A systems approach considers two basic components: elements and processes. In a system, elements and processes are grouped together in order to reduce complexity of the system for conceptual and applied purposes (University of Washington, 2010). Therefore, the relationship between the components of a system is an important characteristic of a system (Deming, 1994; Nichols, 2002) as unrelated and independent elements can never constitute a system (Pidwirny, 2006a). This assertion has particular relevance to the emerging area of QA in HE as Ehlers (2009)

and others have argued for a need for systematic consolidation of HE research so that the interrelationship between the different sub studies are more meaningful.

System theory is often a macro level concept and Pidwirny (2006a) argues that most systems share a common set of characteristics. A general formula of systems theory was defined by Klir (1991). As noted in Figure 2.1, Klir argues that a system is made up of key things (elements) and the relationship between these elements. He proposed the formula S=(T* R). In the formula, T stands for elements or attributes in a system, R stands for every relationship and special characteristics (Skyttner, 2001).

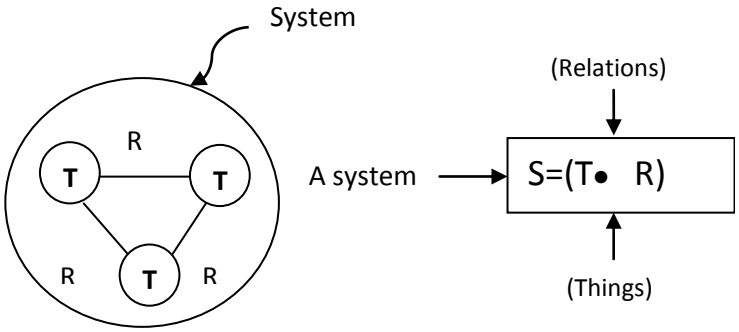

Figure 2.2. A general formula of Systems Theory

Figure 2.2 illustrates the key elements in a system and the importance of relationships between these elements for a system to function as a system.

In summary, it can be said that systems theory can be applied to all types of systems and in all fields of research. The primacy of systems theory is interrelationships and not the independent elements of a system. It is from these interrelationships that new properties of the system emerge. Systems theory is useful for studies which examine the holistic nature of a complex phenomenon. Overall, *Emergence* and *interrelations* are the fundamental ideas of systems thinking (Flood, 2010). Flood explains emergence by using the popular phrase 'the whole is greater than the sum of its parts'.

Extending the system theory to QA, Gilbert (1992) argues that quality assurance involves systematic planning as well as control and implementation of all the functions and activities of a product or service. For this reason, treating QA as a system provides the opportunity to identify the systematic elements of QA, so that all relationships between different elements of a QA system are considered and understood. Systems theory has been used in QA processes long before HE sector started talking about QA. For instance, Karapetrovic and Willborn (2000) note that

ISO 9001 audits had been based on systems approach. Karapetrovic and Willborn elaborate that since "an audit is viewed as a set of interdependent processes" (p. 681) it is regarded as a system and the systemic characteristics of audits bear an impact on quality assurance and effectiveness of audits" (p. 683). Hence, the systems theory was appropriate to conceptualise the framework for investigation of HE QA as a system.

2.7.2 Conceptual framework.

Section 2.4.1 of this chapter discussed systems theory in general, focusing on the different variables and the importance of the relationships between these variables. Given the complexity of a QA system and the complementary nature of the various relationships between variables discussed in other sections of this chapter, system theory provides an optimum means to integrate the different aspects and provide a conceptual framework for the study. Therefore, it is important to demonstrate the systematic characteristic of QA in higher education within a system framework by emphasising the importance of the relationships between different variables of QA in higher education is central to formulation of any QA model. The importance of a systems theory for this study lies with Von Bertalanffy's (Bertalanffy, 1968, 1973) proposition regarding the limitations of traditional scientific approaches to adequately explain holistic relationships. Therefore, the usefulness of systems theory to the field of quality assurance in higher education is relevant as it can be used to view the whole, as opposed to parts of a system; understand the interactions and interrelationships of the parts within a system; and deal with increased number of variables and complexity that exist (Irving, 1999).

While this research was situated within a systems theory, it is worth considering whether QA in higher education can be regarded as a system or not. Numerous researchers in the field of QA in HE (Bogue, 1998; Currie, Krbec, & Higgins, 2005; Hodson & Thomas, 2003; Houston & Maniku, 2005; Luckett, 2007; Newton, 2004; Nilsson & Wahlen, 2000; Smith & Ngoma-Maema, 2003; Stanley & Patrick, 1998; Stella, 2006; Strydom & Strydom, 2004; Veiga & Amaral, 2009) referred to QA as a system. On the other hand, Deming (1994) notes that some 94% of quality problems result from a faulty system. These arguments further support the importance of investigating QA from a systems perspective.

Having a sound quality assurance system means having a lot of elements and attributes, and relationships between them. From a systems perspective, a higher education system should help ensure that institutions have appropriate members of staff, students, administrators, and courses. A higher education system should also have appropriate standards and policies in place as well as an internal audit mechanism for institutions and national regulatory bodies, which are responsible for external audits of institutions (Manyaga, 2008).

Analysis of systems theory and comparisons of it with QA in higher education reveals the common systematic characteristics of QA in higher education across many countries. It includes national HE laws for determining the status and form of national QA, and the establishment of a responsible national agency with appropriate regulations and procedure to develop, implement and monitor QA measures. It also includes preparing and disseminating public reports of the evaluations, the follow-up process after the report, and the decision making regarding the outcome of QA processes. Other areas of commonality include the role of professional bodies, the transparency of internal and external QA procedures, and the ranking or grading of evaluations (Billing, 2004). Though these characteristics may vary to some degree from system to system, it can be argued that most of these have commonalities, and have to be viewed as a system due to the complementing functions.

Flood (2010) argues that valid knowledge and meaningful understandings come from looking at phenomena at a whole not by breaking them into parts. Similarly, HE QA systems function better when all the important functions and elements are organised with a system. Another important feature of a system is that it is like an organism that continues to grow and get stronger. If the whole ecology is healthy and performing well, it is able to adopt changes (Flood, 2010). As more research is undertaken and parts of the QA system are analysed further, new and additional information will become available and continue to strength the system. As a result, QA in higher education is evolving and growing rapidly (Lewis, 2009; Van Damme, 2000) and is being further challenged by rapid development in international communication on higher education quality assurance. This is evident in the emergence of quality assurance agencies and networks, and in the increase of scholarly journals and conferences (Van Damme, 2000).

The importance of adopting a systems approach can be seen in other sectors as well and its now emerging in higher education as quality systems (Stephenson, 2004). Consequently, quality assurance agencies are advised to establish structured quality systems with clearly described policies and procedures that not only support their individual operations but also assist the function of complementing agencies as well (Manyaga, 2008). It is a system that ensures the product, service and performance within a sector or organisation meets certain agreed standards. Therefore, the above discussion further confirms the advantage of adopting a systems theory as its conceptual and theoretical framework with consideration of different variables and the relationship among those variables.

Skyttner (2001) argues that for a system to be functional, the elements need to be clearly defined in order to have a direct effect on the relations between the elements. The first part of this chapter focussed on reviewing the key elements and their definitions. This section also noted that in a system there are elements, attributes and relationships that jointly work to make a system function. The importance of the elements and attributes influences their role and function within a system. For instance, the role of governance and regulatory bodies in a QA system may be functional/performance monitoring only or can be a legal monitoring mechanism with punitive implications. Also, often these elements and attributes can have feedback and self-checking mechanisms, which again are abilities offered by systems theory (Irving, 1999). Houston and Maniku (2005) argue that a systems approach can help to work through the complex nature of External Quality Assurance (EQA). As EQA is part of QA in higher education, it can be understood that the same approach can be applicable for the whole QA.

Figure 2.2 below illustrates preliminary conceptualisation centred on three key elements of a QA system in higher education and some of the underlying sub-attributes that emerged from the literature review. The three main elements are: (1) legislative framework, (2) QA standards, and (3) the process underpinning service delivery. In light of the complexity of QA in higher education, these three elements are found in most QA mechanisms and are considered key elements. These key elements will provide the basis for a conceptual framework for this research. The terminology *Regulatory framework* is used to underscore the assumption that having a good legislative framework is part of the best practice in HE QA (ENQA, 2006).

Such legislative arrangements are also referred to as regulatory frameworks (ENQA, 2006). These arrangements can have a number of instruments such as policies and legislations which are derived from the legislation and are called elements in the proposed conceptual framework. Different types of *Standards* are also an integral part of HE QA systems (Yorke, 1999). A standard can be a criteria, or guideline, or a qualifications framework. As argued in the literature review, quality assurance is often defined as an evaluation of academic programs or a Higher Education Institution or a system against prescribed standards (Manyaga, 2008). This emphasises the importance of standards in a HE QA system and the interrelatedness of each of these elements to one another for the full functioning of a higher education QA system. Finally, *service delivery* here is regarded as a functional element of a HE QA system. This element is the implementation stage of the other two elements. These services can vary from different types of accreditation to institutional audit.

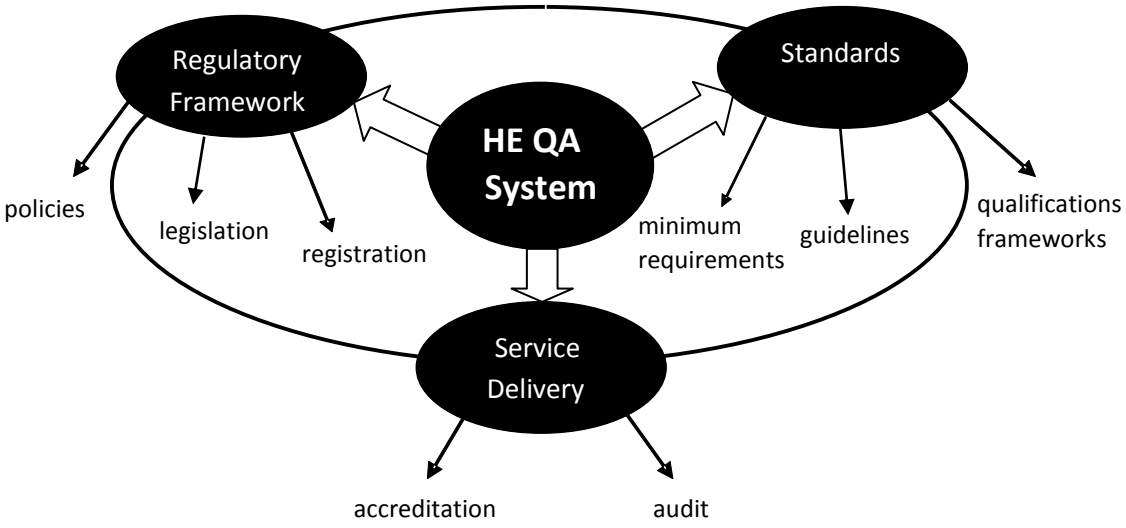

Figure 2.3. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for a system of higher education QA illustrated above emerged from combining the theoretical framework derived from systems theory and the global higher education QA research literature and its underlying principles and concepts. This concept of higher education QA system acts as the conceptual framework for this study. The framework provided a guide for this study that explored how the above model may function as a quality assurance model for Small States. It allowed the researcher to investigate the various elements, attributes and relations between and among them. To achieve that, the main research question and sub-questions had been devised to focus on the issues of quality assurance in

higher education in Small States, that is, the key elements and regulatory mechanisms suitable for Small States. The questions are:

What constitutes key elements and regulatory mechanisms of an effective QA system in higher education for Small States?

- What are the elements and the underpinning assumptions of a higher education QA system?
- What are the key regulatory and supporting management and governance issues of a robust higher education QA mechanism for Small States?
- What are the operational drivers and how they may affect a higher education QA system?

This theoretical position needs to be verified and any peculiarities associated with the Small State context will be identified together with possible ways to resolve the issues through sound empirical evidence. The next chapter proposes a research design that will utilise appropriate methodology to explore the context of Small States in regard to these questions.

2.8 SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this chapter was to review the literature on quality assurance in higher education and explore the key elements of QA in higher education as well as the underpinning principles and major concepts that could contribute as a basis towards a formulated QA model for Small States. The chapter reviewed the literature relating to the main research questions concerning the key elements of and regulatory mechanisms of an effective QA system in higher education for Small States. To support this investigation, the literature review focussed on exploring studies related to the research sub-questions one and two, concerning the assumptions and key elements of a higher education QA system as well as the operational drivers in a higher education QA system. Therefore, the literature review provided a broad overview of QA systems around the world, beginning with a discussion of systems theory facilitating the argument that it can be applicable to any system, including quality assurance in higher education. This was followed by the discussion of crucial topics which have relevance to the research problem from which the research questions are drawn. This includes defining quality as well as quality assurance,

investigating the difference between standards and quality assurance, different agendas in QA literature, quality assurance models around the world, including that of Small States.

It was evident from the review that defining quality and quality assurance is not simple. In fact there are various definitions from different stakeholders. As a result, definitions are developed according to stakeholder interests. However, the definition which probably earned the most widespread acceptance is 'quality as fitness for/ of purpose'. The issue here is whose purpose is the quality being considered for and what is considered 'fit'. Defining quality assurance may not be as contested as defining quality, but it is important to note that quality assurance is a constantly evolving domain as a result of the changing nature of the higher education landscape due to the globalisation and internationalisation of higher education itself. Nonetheless, quality assurance can be defined as an all-embracing term covering all policies, processes and procedures through which quality of higher education is assessed, developed, maintained and monitored. For this reason, QA is a system and variables within the system influence and complement the roles of each other. Yet, they are expected to have a certain level of separation and integrity.

Standards debate and its relation to quality assurance are relevant to this study. While quality of teaching and research programs are often referred to as academic standards, all transparency tools in the form of qualifications frameworks, levels of standards and criteria are also referred to as standards by quality assurance agencies. The literature review highlighted the interrelationship between the domains of standards and quality assurance. Setting standards is one thing and ensuring those standards are upheld is another and the function of a QA system. This is why assuring quality against standards is so important. Therefore, some countries are realising the importance of setting higher standards and also at the same time, setting up suitable quality assurance mechanisms to assure those standards. On the other hand, making clear cut judgements regarding the standards of the quality of teaching and research at universities in the form of ranking studies, has become a sensitive issue and attracts considerable curiosity as well as critique. Rankings focus considerably on the research strength of universities; higher research standards usually mean high investments by universities. While some argue that ranking studies or league tables provide transparency about higher education institutions and

also promote a competitive environment among institutions and scholars, critiques of ranking point out a number of limitations including lack of methodological rigour. Another concern is, even though standards are developed according to the local context, a vast majority of the world's higher education institutions are measured against global benchmarks.

The review focused on how the internationalisation of higher education has become a major force for change in higher education. It is driven by continuous advances in information and communication technologies (ICT), mass air travel and dominance of English as the common language of business, politics and science. Internationalisation has been linked to the emergence of new delivery methods in higher education such as virtual universities, off-shore provision of higher education, and twinning programs as well as online education. These emerging new arrangements invite different players with differing agendas into the field of higher education as well as quality assurance in the field. UNESCO is concerned with cross-border higher education, and has developed guidelines for quality assurance of higher education delivered across borders. INQAAHE has vested interest in promoting the quality of quality assurance bodies. The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) has been active in online and distance learning through its virtual university, with a quality assurance mechanism in place through Transnational Qualifications Framework. On the other hand, ENQA has a regional agenda in Europe to facilitate greater mobility of students, workforce as well as teaching staff by enhancing regional transparency and comparability of qualifications through better quality assurance arrangements. Yet, these agencies are criticised for lacking the regulatory power and the means to enforce quality assurance standards. Also, diversity in the delivery methods of internationalisation of higher education poses real challenges for importing countries to regulate accreditation, licensing, and consequently quality assurance, which itself may be alarming to Small States.

There are various factors that contribute to the growth of quality assurance. These include growth in higher education, increased diversity in higher education, dilemmas in reducing direct government control and external quality assurance, increases in the number of private providers in higher education, and internationalisation of higher education. Quality assurance models found around the world are usually based on some fundamental principles, which are common and

essential for all higher education systems. Having a strong national body for quality assurance by making it independent of government ministries and also of the higher education institutions are regarded as important principles for QA agencies. In addition, having instruments such as appropriate criteria, guidelines and standards are important principles to adhere to in order to bolster the transparency of quality assurance processes and procedures. Various interpretations of concepts such as accreditation and institutional audit exist. Nonetheless, many countries rely either on accreditation and audit or both combined. However, Small States, especially economically more disadvantaged nations among them, are lagging behind many bigger and developed nations. Though Small States such as Mauritius have set up QA systems that are on par with bigger nations, many Small States still remain in the early stages of introducing or implementing QA mechanisms. These developments bear a regional trend as many of the Small States are small island nations clustered in regions such as the Indian Ocean, Caribbean and the Pacific. In addition, the question of suitability of new arrangements to the local context is an issue to be addressed and further investigated.

The literature review identified only a few previous studies that have focused on QA of higher education in Small States, which is not surprising given that they constitute a small market in the global scheme of things. Nevertheless, for these Small States, there is an urgent need to ensure their own HE systems are delivering quality education and at the same time have capacity to regulate transnational providers who may exploit their citizens. Due to limited previous studies on HE in Small States, there is not sufficient information available from the literature on the current status of QA of higher education in Small States. Similarly, there is little discussion on possible suitable models for Small State contexts. This study contributed to this gap by identifying the challenges and needs of a typical Small State, leading to a proposed QA model.

Chapter 3: Research Design

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This Chapter outlines the methodology and the methods to be used in this research and explains how they relate to the conceptual framework presented in Chapter Two (Figure 2.3) and the research phenomenon under study. Under systems theory, there are key elements and attributes of each element. Flood (2010) argues that the interrelationship between elements is important for the systemic characteristic of organisational practices.

This chapter describes the design adopted by this research to achieve the aims and objectives stated in Chapter One, that is, to develop a model for a HE QA system for Small States by analysing what constitutes a QA system and exploring the key elements and relationships between the elements. This section (3.1) provides an introduction to this chapter. Section 3.2 discusses the methodology used in the study and the stages by which the methodology was implemented. Section 3.3 details the participants in the study. Section 3.4 discusses how the data were analysed. Section 3.5 outlines the procedures used and the timeline for completion of each stage of the study. Section 3.6 discusses the ethical considerations of the research and its potential problems and limitations.

A gap exists in the knowledge of QA systems particularly, in the context of Small States. This gap is discussed in Chapter One and is further elaborated in the literature review in Chapter Two. Therefore, there is a need to understand the phenomenon and establish an understanding of what stakeholders from Small States view as quality assurance (QA) in higher education (HE). Guba and Lincoln (1989) argue that the phenomena can only be understood within the context in which they are studied. Therefore, this research was guided by a qualitative case study approach underpinned by a constructivist interpretive paradigm. This study was more about understanding the phenomena of QA and hence contributing to the knowledge in the area of QA in higher education. Guba and Lincoln (2001) suggest that despite the mounting arguments against alternative paradigms, particularly the constructivist paradigm by advocates of the conventional positivist paradigm, there is a need for

this paradigm because there are clear differences between the two. Perhaps the most notable difference Guba and Lincoln identify is that the conventional paradigm does not contemplate the need to identify stakeholders and to solicit claims, concerns, and issues from them, which is one of the most compelling arguments for the constructivist paradigm.

Guba and Lincoln (2001) describe a paradigm as a basic set of beliefs or assumptions which serve as touchstones in guiding activities – which in this case is investigating what constitutes the key elements of a QA system in higher education and their inter-relationships appropriate for Small States. Creswell (2003) notes that the constructivist paradigm allows the researcher to position him/herself within the research and to acknowledge that his/her interpretation flows from his/her own personal, cultural, and historical experiences.

To investigate the research phenomenon, the research design and the methodology should be able to explore the key elements, their relationships and the operational drivers for QA in higher education for Small State contexts. The evolving nature of the QA systems for higher education, particularly for the Small States, requires an inductive research strategy, which clarifies and refines concepts and hypotheses, and unpacks critical relationships, taking into consideration the perspectives of all stakeholders (Merriam, 1998). This insider's perspective –as Merriam points out, is needed to understand the phenomenon of interest, which in this case is, QA in higher education in Small States.

The aforementioned requirements of the research, which necessitate the building of concepts, hypotheses and relationships from the participants' perspective, is argued by Merriam (1998) as more conducive to a qualitative research methodology. In addition, the lack of existing research and mature theory in the field of QA, with a focus on Small States, is another reason why an inductive, qualitative design is more suitable to this study. Furthermore, because the phenomena in this research, explores processes, meanings and understandings of higher education QA, the research requires descriptions of the context, rather than quantified measures. This is another characteristic of qualitative research, as noted by Merriam. Therefore, this research was based on qualitative research principles.

This research has a number of characteristics of qualitative research that Creswell (2003) highlights. First, this research took place in the natural setting where

the participants live. The case study was in the Maldives and the data collection was carried out in the Maldives. This enabled the researcher to develop a level of detail about higher education QA in the context of Small States. Second, this research used two methods for inquiry: interviews and document analysis. Third, the findings of this research emerged from the literature review, the interviews and document analysis. This allowed the researcher the flexibility and freedom of refining and changing the research questions, data collection processes at the proposal or early research stage. Fourth, while qualitative research is fundamentally interpretive, it allowed the researcher to filter data through a personal lens situated in the context of higher education QA in Small States. Fifth, the researcher of this study views the phenomena of higher education QA holistically, as the focus is on developing a general model. This enabled a broad, panoramic view rather than micro-analysis. Sixth, qualitative research design allows the researcher to reflect on who he or she is in the inquiry and is sensitive to his or her personal biography and how it shapes the study. Thus, there were biases, values, and interests in this study that represent honesty and openness to research, which is acknowledged and addressed under section 3.6 ethics and limitations. Seventh, the qualitative design allowed the researcher to use complex reasoning that is multi-faceted, iterative, and simultaneous. Also the thinking process was iterative, with a cycling back and forth from data collection and analysis to problem reformulating and back.

3.2 METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

As noted above, the study will adopt a qualitative approach and more specifically 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 the study, the systems theory and the QA models provided such a theoretical 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.

The strength of case study method is that it will facilitate gaining an in-depth understanding of higher education QA in the context of Small States (Merriam,

1998). Case studies value multiple perspectives of the stakeholders and the participants, observation, and interpretation in context (Simons, 2009). While QA in HE is a complex area (Ehlers, 2009; Pillay & Kimber, 2009), Soy (1997 para.1) argues that case study is an excellent way of bringing "an understanding of a complex issue or object and can extend experience or add strength to what is already known through previous research". Soy also notes the role of case studies in emphasising detailed contextual analysis of a limited number of events or conditions and their relationships. As discussed under Sections 2.7, Systems Theory allows seeking an understanding of the relationship between different elements of a system. Thus, using a case study approach for this research was useful in order to understand the conditions and relationships among different elements of a QA system appropriate for Small States. This provided the basis for the application of ideas and extension of methods (Soy, 1997).

The main research question was "*What constitutes key elements and regulatory mechanisms of an effective QA system in higher education for Small States?"* The question led to exploration of a holistic model for a QA system in higher education suitable to Small States. Merriam (1998) argues that case study research allows investigation of the holistic description and explanation. While the literature review came short of providing sufficient empirical evidence that is enough for understanding of the phenomena of QA in higher education in the context of Small States, the case study method provided that opportunity.

Therefore, a single descriptive case study (Creswell, 2013) approach was proposed for this study. The single case was the Maldives, which is one of the Small States. The rationale for using a single case is that the Maldives is representative or typical of most Small States – as mentioned in Chapter One. Stake (Stake, 1995) suggests that when a single instrumental case study is used to provide a general understanding of a phenomenon then it can be a particular typical case. This will provide an insight into and develop generalisations (Stake, 1995). This Maldives case study is characterised by its generalisability to other Small States because most of the Small States – as discussed in Chapter One – share similar characteristics. Thus, the Maldives case study explored possible linkages, similarities, challenges, issues and QA options that emerged and were relevant to that of Small State contexts. On the other hand, apart from being single, a descriptive case study can present a complete

description of the context (Merriam, 1998) of Small States by the Maldives case study.

3.2.1 Data collection.

As mentioned under the research design section in Chapter One, case study method allows multiple sources of evidence. Though there are many sources of evidence that can be used in case studies, Merriam (1998) considers interviews, as the most common source of data in case studies. Other sources such as documents are also among the data collection methods (Creswell, 2012).

The data collection process in this study was guided by the research question, which was supported by the three research sub-questions. This study used two methods for data collection, namely, document analysis and interviews. The interviews were in-depth research interviews (Yin, 2009a), which were semi-structured (Simons, 2009). Semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to have a deeper understanding of QA issues from interviewees as the whole idea of this type of interview is "to delve more deeply into the social situation" (Myers & Newman, 2007, p. 12), interpretation of events, understandings, experiences and opinions (Byrne, 2004). Yin also suggests that document analysis helps the researcher to corroborate and argue evidence from interviews.

Simons (2009) points out four advantages of using in-depth semi-structured interviews, which were applicable to this study. First, interviews assisted to understand a stakeholder's perspective on what constitutes key elements of a QA system in higher education for Small States. This is something that was central to the proposed study; views of a range of stakeholders were sought. Second, it promoted active engagement and learning for the interviewer and interviewees in identifying and analysing issues. Given that the researcher was previously employed by the Maldives Qualifications Authority and is known to most prospective interviewees, free, open and active interactions were anticipated to ensure richness of the data. Third, interviews offered inherent flexibility to change direction to pursue emergent issues, to probe a topic or deepen a response, and to engage in dialogue with participants. Since the HE scene in the Maldives has been undergoing major changes, flexibility and opportunity to revisit some of the investigation areas were an advantage and were readily facilitated through semi-structured interviews. Fourth, in-depth interviews provided the possibility of uncovering and representing unobserved

feeling and events that cannot be observed. Further details of how the interviews were conducted appear later in this section.

Simons (2009) suggests if document analysis is carried out before interviewing and observing, it can identify issues that may be useful to explore in the case and can provide a context for interpretation of interviews. He argues that documents can be anything written or produced about the context or the phenomenon under investigation. The advantages of documents or texts include their richness, relevance and effect, the fact that they occur naturally, and their availability (Silverman, 2006). Further details of document analysis are presented later in this section.

Using these two techniques for data collection aided in addressing the research question: "What constitutes key elements and regulatory mechanisms of an effective QA system in higher education for Small States?" and the research sub-questions:

- What are the elements and the underpinning assumptions of a higher education QA system?
- What are the key regulatory and supporting management and governance issues of a robust higher education QA mechanism generally and in particular for Small States?
- What are the operational drivers and how may they affect a higher education QA system?

The data analytical strategy for this study had been conceived as *content analysis* of themes and recurring patterns of meaning that emerge from the interviews and documents (Merriam, 1998). This was facilitated by coding, categorising, concept mapping, and theme generation (Simons, 2009). Simons claims that these processes enable the researcher "to organise and make sense of data to produce findings and understanding (or theory) of the case" (p.117). The data collection and analysis in this research was a simultaneous process (Merriam, 1998). The advantage of concurrent data analysis is that it helped formulate new questions and identify who to ask as the interviews progressed. However, while intensive analysis was progressive, there was also further review and analysis once all the data were collected. Detailed descriptions of data collection instruments, participants, site selection, procedures, timeline, analysis, ethics and limitations of this research are presented in the following sections of this chapter.

3.2.1.1 Document analysis.

Merriam (1998, p. 112) describes documents as "a ready-made source of data" which is easily accessible – though this may not always be true, depending on the documents and who has control. Nevertheless, documentary information was an important data source for this study. QA in higher education usually depends heavily on different types of documents, ranging from policy papers, standards and criteria, as well as guidelines, which are sometimes referred to as transparency tools (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), 2010). Therefore, using available documents from the Maldives QA agency – Maldives Qualifications Authority (MQA), and other stakeholders in the system, helped add depth and richness to the data (Simons, 2009). Such data allowed cross validation with data obtained from the interviews. As documents have great value in data collection in doing case studies, systematic searches for existing relevant documents in the context were important for this data collection plan (Merriam, 1998).

Using documents as a data collection instrument has a number of benefits. Some of the strengths of documents noted by Merriam (1998) are, "easily accessible, free, and contain information that would take an investigator enormous time and effort to gather otherwise" (p. 125). Other strengths highlighted by Merriam include reliability of document data in the sense that it can furnish descriptive information, verify emerging hypotheses, its stability and its ability to "ground an investigation in the context of the problem being investigated" (p. 126). However, it is important to note that there may be weaknesses in using documents. One limitation noted by Merriam (1998) is that "documents are not developed for research purposes and therefore the information they offer may not be in a form that is useful" (p. 124). Another major problem with the documents as a data source is "determining their authenticity and accuracy" (Merriam, 1998, p. 125). Selecting already available and highly relevant documents to higher education QA could have helped mitigate against these weaknesses.

The most important use of documents for this study was to corroborate and augment evidence from interviews (Creswell & Miller, 2000). In this regard, two benefits of documents are identified for this research. First, documents can provide information to corroborate or else contradict information from interviews. In this way, there was the opportunity of pursuing the problem by inquiring further into the

topic of higher education QA. Second, the researcher was able to make inferences from documents for further investigation through interviews – however, not as conclusive findings because the inferences could turn out to be false leads. Simons (2009) emphasises that considering what documents already exist when beginning a study is always worthwhile. Table 3.1 gives a list of sample documents used for this study.

Table 3.1

*The list of documents reviewed**

Name of the document	Source	Type of the document	Code
The Maldives National Qualifications Framework	MQA	standard	Document[1]
The Format and Guidelines for Preparing Course Approval Document	MQA	guideline	Document[2]
MQA mandate	MQA	policy	Document[3]
Terms of reference of MQA governing board	MQA	policy	Document[4]
The Maldives National University Act	MNU	legislation	Document[5]
Human Capital for a Knowledge Society: Higher Education in the Maldives	MoE	policy review	Document[6]
The Strategic Action Plan – National Framework for Development 2009 – 2013	MQA	policy	Document[7]
Minimum Entry Requirements for MNQF 2009	MQA	guideline	Document[8]
MQA governing board letter by the President's Office	MQA	policy	Document[9]
National Competency Standard for Fish Processing and Quality Controller	MoE	standard	Document[10]

* Refer to Appendix E for descriptions of these documents.

3.2.1.2 Semi-structured interviews.

The second data source was from semi-structured in-depth interviews. This type of interview allows the researcher "to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic" (Merriam, 1998, p. 74). This was achieved through structuring a series of broad questions to help shape the interview protocol where specific information is required from all the respondents. Some of these questions were applied to all interviewees to ascertain the

consensus view on key issues and the remaining questions were on issues to be explored (Merriam, 1998). The benefit of using common questions was that it will address relational aspects of the systems framework. On the other hand, using specific questions to interviewees from three different stakeholder groups illustrated individual elements within the systems framework. Emerging themes were followed up either with the participant or with other participants to ensure consistency and clarity. When necessary, documentary searches were carried out to verify or supplement the information provided by the participants.

Interviewing is regarded as the most common method of data collection in qualitative research, especially in education (Merriam, 1998). This view is confirmed by Yin (2009a) who suggests that interviews have been seen as one of the most important sources of information for case studies. The advantages of interviews lie with the fact that "useful when participants cannot be directly observed, participants can provide historical information, and allow the researcher control over the line of questioning" (Creswell, 2009, p. 179). Causal inferences are critical for this study to appreciate the relationships between different aspects of the phenomenon under investigation. To ensure the interviews were both focussed and insightful, the interview protocol was closely matched to key issues noted in the literature review and concepts included in the conceptual framework.

Another strength of interviews was that it allowed the researcher "control" over the line of questioning (Creswell, 2003). As semi-structured interviews were conducted, there were follow-up questions during each interview and that allowed some level of control over the direction and flow of interviews, which was more relevant to the research problem and research questions. The researcher was well aware of the possible weaknesses of interviews as well. For instance, bias related to responses, poorly constructed questions, inaccuracies due to poor recall, and reflexivity, which means the interviewee gives what the interviewer wants to hear (Yin, 1998). These factors were considered when structuring and conducting the interviews. Corroborating interview responses with document analysis (Yin, 2009a) helped mitigate against some of these weaknesses such as bias in response and poor recall. Also, corroborating interview responses from all interviewees, instead of relying on just one interviewee helped mitigate against bias.

Though the interviews were semi-structured, follow up questions were used for further investigation. The semi structure design has selected lead questions but as the interviews unfolded, other questions were raised to seek clarification and elaborations. Given sufficient time (60 minutes per interview), the interviewees were able to provide useful and detailed information on higher education QA issues. Merriam (1998) proposes this type of interview where "specific information is desired by all respondents, in which case there is a highly structured section to the interview" (p. 74), but the larger part of the interview was guided by a set of (follow-up) questions not worded ahead of time (Yin, 2009a). These semi-structured interviews with participants are well suited to the overall aim of the case study in this research, which was to gain the stakeholders' own understanding and interpretations of what constitutes the key elements of QA system in higher education for Small States.

The interviews were audio recorded, with consent of the participants as noted in the ethics application, using a digital recorder and then transcribed later. However, as a precautionary measure, the researcher took some notes during the interviews in the event that recording equipment fails and to corroborate the data later (Creswell, 2003). The transcripts were shared with the participants to ensure the transcriptions accurately represent their views. Creswell calls this member checking. This process increased the validity of the process as the interviewees were invited to verify and comment on the transcription before analysis is undertaken.

3.2.2 Trustworthiness.

Baxter and Jack (2008) suggest that trustworthiness in a research project can be shown in providing enough detail so that readers can assess the validity and credibility of the work. In line with Baxter and Jack's suggestion, a number of key elements had been integrated to the design of this research in order to enhance credibility and trustworthiness. First, every effort was made to ensure the research question (see Chapter One) and the interview questions were clearly articulated. Second, the case study in the Maldives as being the case of a Small State was appropriate for the research question, which was to explore what constitutes key elements and regulatory mechanisms of an effective QA system in HE for Small States. Third, purposeful sampling strategies, appropriate for a case study, had been used to select major stakeholders in the higher education QA system in the Maldives.

Fourth, data were collected and managed systematically. As explained in section 3.4, data analysis software NVivo was used for coding and categorising transcribed interview data and written materials. Having electronic data for manipulation through NVivo provided a solid audit trail of the process, which is critical and significant for qualitative studies as it strengthens reliability (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007).

Other measures in place to increase the validity and trustworthiness included member-checking (as mentioned in the previous section on interviews), in which participants were given the opportunity to discuss and clarify the interpretation and contribute additional perspectives (Baxter & Jack, 2008). This research acknowledges the close association of the researcher to the higher education QA agency in the Maldives. Hence, reporting this possible bias, and addressing this issue by providing measures to mitigate against it, established reliability in this research.

3.3 PARTICIPANTS AND SITE SELECTION

Important to the process of data collection are the participants and site selection. The Maldives was selected as the case study site because it is a typical case of a higher education QA system in a Small State. The Maldives is one of the small island states that could potentially represent many of the issues Small States face today. This study used purposeful sampling, also called *typical* sample type (Merriam, 1998). Merriam points out that purposeful sampling is the most common form of *non-probability* sample strategy. Merriam (1998) argues that non-probability sampling is the method of choice for most qualitative research. Henry (2009) observes that non-probability samples allow influence of human judgments – either purposefully or unintentionally – in the selection of units or individuals for the study. On the other hand, Merriam (1998) states that purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the researcher wants to discover, understand, and gain insights and therefore must select a sample from which most can be learned. She defines purposeful sampling as a sample that reflects the average person, situation, or instance or phenomenon of interest.

The participants for this case study were sourced from three sites. These three categories of sites represented three different elements discussed earlier in the conceptual framework – related to the overall QA system in higher education for the Maldives. The three categories of sites were key officials of the government who

were at policy level, the QA regulatory body, and higher education institutions. These categories represented three key areas, namely (1) legislative framework, (2) quality standards, and (3) service delivery. In addition to a common set of questions for all participants – as mentioned in Section 3.2.1, there were different questions according to the types of stakeholders: Ministry of Education; Maldives Qualifications Authority; and selected higher education institutions in the Maldives. Details of the relationship between data sources (document analysis and interviews) and conceptual framework as well as the data analysis procedure for each of the sources are explained in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2

Data collection and participants

Data source	Data collection method	Relationship between data and conceptual framework	Data analysis
Relevant documents related to the higher education QA system in the Maldives	Content analysis	Corroborate evidence from interviews. Identify standards in the HE QA system in the Maldives.	Data were coded, categorised, analysed and compared with interview data.
Senior technical persons representing each of the leading higher education institutions in the Maldives (minimum of 9 participants)	Semi-structured interviews (audio-taped)	Identify the internal quality assurance systems within the HEIs, as well as the perspective of institutions on national QA arrangements.	Interview data were organised, coded, interpreted and analysed and compared with information gathered from documents to develop themes and patterns for understanding QA systems.
Senior management of the Maldives Qualifications Authority (2-3 participants)	Semi-structured interviews (audio-taped)	Explore the understanding of the operational issues and policy challenges in regard to the relationship with MoE	
Senior management of the Ministry of Education, Maldives (2-3 participants)	Semi-structured interviews (audio-taped)	Explore the issues related to national policies with respect to QA in higher education governance and legislation	
Representatives from leading industry associations (1 participant from each)	Semi-structured interviews (audio-taped)	Explore the specific industry concern in relation to higher education/ QA in higher education	

Table 3.2 gives an outline of the procedures across and within the techniques to be used in this study. There were general questions asked to each stakeholder group as well as specific questions. The interview with senior officials of the Ministry of Education focused on issues related to national policies with respect to QA in higher education governance and legislation. The interview with senior officials of MQA focused on obtaining detailed understanding of the operational issues and policy challenges in regard to the relationship with MoE. The interviews with the key senior technical staff of the higher education institutions focused on obtaining information about their internal quality assurance systems as well as their perspective on national QA arrangements. The interview with representatives of the leading industry associations tried to explore the industry needs and concerns in relation to higher education QA developments. Sample questions for MoE, MQA, and higher education institutions are provided in Appendix 1, Appendix 2 and Appendix 3, respectively.

In terms of the document analysis, the relevant documents were sought from all two levels of sites: MoE, and MQA, and higher education institutions. A list of types of documents identified is provided in Table 3.1. Further discussion on documents analysis is provided under Section document analysis in Section 3.2.1.1.

The participants and sites were identified as illustrated in Table 3.3. It was anticipated that 50% of the key officials of MoE, MQA, leading higher education institutions and leading industry associations in the Maldives – who had at least 12 months experience – were selected for interviews. Officials with sufficient experience were considered for interviews so that they can be fully versed with QA issues and can make useful contribution. Given their positions at their respective government agencies and higher education institutions, these three groups of people were envisaged to be able to give the researcher valuable, in-depth data about what constitutes key elements of QA in higher education, as well as operational issues and options for the future. That is, they were the key informants who have operational experience and in-depth understanding of the system under study.

Table 3.3

Sites and participants

Site	Participants	Site code
Ministry of Education	Senior Staff	MoE
Maldives Qualifications Authority	Senior Staff	MQA
The National University of Maldives	senior/technical staff**	HEI[1], HEI[2]
Focus Education Centre	senior/technical staff	HEI[3]
Villa College	senior/technical staff	HEI[4]
Cyryx College	senior/technical staff	HEI[5]
Clique College	senior/technical staff	HEI[6]
Mandhu College	senior/technical staff	HEI[7]
MAPS College	senior/technical staff	HEI[8]
Police Academy	senior/technical staff	HEI[9]
Maldives National Chamber of Commerce and Industries	senior staff	Industry[1]
Maldives Association of Tourism Industry	senior staff	Industry[2]
Maldives Association of Construction Industry	senior staff	Industry[3]
Teachers Association of Maldives	senior staff	Industry[4]
Civil Service Commission (CSC)	senior staff	Industry[5]

Only one staff member from each site participated in the study except where ** is indicated 2 participants were involved.

As the Maldives is a very small country, these institutions are also very small. Hence, the numbers of senior/ technical staff who represented these institutions are also small as well. However, because there was a broad stakeholder involvement, it was anticipated that would bring a more diversified view of QA issues.

3.4 DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis of this study was guided by the analytical principles of case study research proposed by Creswell (2003), which involves "a detailed description of the setting or individuals, followed by analysis of the data for themes or issues" (p. 191). The analysis for themes and issues were achieved through *content analysis approach*. Merriam (1998, p. 160) argues that in "one sense, all qualitative data analysis is content analysed in that it is the *content* of interviews, field notes, and documents that is analysed."

The explorative and descriptive approach adopted by the study used an "inductive process of breaking down data into segments or data sets that are then categorised, ordered and examined for connections, patterns and propositions that seek to explain the data" (Simons, 2009, p. 117). These segments were structured around the key elements noted in the conceptual framework. Another level of analysis sought an understanding of the relationships between the elements. Creswell (2003) identifies a number of processes that are essential when undertaking the data analysis. This includes preparing data for analysis, conducting different analyses, moving deeper into understanding data, representing data, and making an interpretation of the larger meaning of the data. Hence, the following generic steps suggested by Creswell were followed as a data analysis plan in accordance with data collection methods:

Step 1: *Organise* and *prepare* the data for analysis. This involved transcribing interviews, optically scanning material particularly for document analysis –if necessary, and sorting and arranging data into different types depending on the sources.

Step 2: Read through all the data to obtain a *general sense* of the information and to reflect on its overall meaning. In this stage, for interview data, questions – such as the following – were asked to draw tentative conclusions based on the weight of the evidence (Yin, 2009a). What general ideas were participants saying? What was the tone of the ideas? What was the general impression of the overall depth, credibility, and use of the information? As a help for later stages, notes on general thoughts about data were taken.

Step 3: Begin detailed analysis with a *coding* process. This involved organising interview data and information from documents into categories and labelling those categories with a term. An example of how coding were arranged in this study is illustrated in Table 3.4.

Step 4: Use the coding process to generate a *description* of the categories or themes related to higher education QA for analysis. This involved detailed rendering of information – where possible – about key elements of higher education QA. These themes appeared as the major findings in this study and were stated under separate headings in the

findings section. These included multiple perspectives from individuals and were supported by diverse quotations and specific evidence. This went beyond description and theme identification into complex theme connection.

Step 5: Advance how the description and relationship of the themes were *represented* in the qualitative narrative. The most popular approach is to use a narrative passage to convey the findings of the analysis.

Step 6: The final step in data analysis involved making an *interpretation* or finding meaning within the data. The essence of this idea was captured in the question "what lessons will be learned?" These lessons could be either (1) the researcher's personal interpretation, (2) meaning derived from a comparison of the findings, and (3) new questions that need to be asked.

Some of the processes in the aforementioned steps may have varied during or after data collection. The recording procedures for document analysis were based on a structure of note taking as stated by Creswell (2003). Such a structure reflected information about the documents and key themes included in the documents. In order to make the documents readily retrievable for later inspection or perusal, where possible, portable document format (PDF) copies were stored electronically, which provided a data collection chronology (Creswell & Miller, 2000). This was particularly important given that the data collection phase happened in the Maldives and some of the analysis was conducted in Australia. Having PDF copies of the key documents was beneficial.

As mentioned previously, computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software called NVivo was utilised for coding and categorising both transcribed interview data and written materials (Bazeley, 2007). NVivo provides a range of tools for handling rich data records, coding visually or in categories, annotating and gaining accessed data records accurately and swiftly (Richards, 1999).

However, it is important to keep in mind that NVivo did not do the actual analysis. Rather, it was used as a reliable tool, which assisted data analysis. The following strategy was used in using NVivo software:

- Enter the textual data and then define an initial set of codes into the software;
- Utilise the software features that allow locating in the textual data all words and phrases matching the codes;
- Count the incidence or occurrence of the words or codes;
- Conduct Boolean searches to show when and where multiple combinations are found together; and
- Gradually build more complex categories or groups of codes (Yin, 2009a).

NVivo outputs represented in these steps did not form the end of analysis. Instead, those outputs were studied to determine whether any meaningful patterns emerged (Yin, 2009a). The interpretation of the output was the researcher's task as well as all subsequent justification and explanations.

While coding was important in order to embark in a systematic process of analysing textual data, it was useful for the study to analyse data for material that can yield codes that address the research topic and a larger theoretical perspective, which is what the readers would expect to find (Creswell, 2003). The types of codes that were used in this research, which are suggested by Bodgdan and Biklen (1992) were: (1) perspectives held by participants, (2) participants' ways of thinking about system (people and QA elements), (3) activity codes – based on the frequency of meetings with different groups, and (4) relationship and organisational structure codes – guided by key QA elements, attributes, and relationships. A sample coding structure for the element of service delivery is illustrated in Table 3.4.

Table 3.4

Sample coding for QA element of service delivery

Attribute	Occurring themes	Stakeholder	Codes
Accreditation	Cyclic	MQA, NUM	Cyclic-MQA, cyclic-HEI[1]
Audit	Transparency	Villa, MQA, Cyryx	Transparency-HEI[4], Transparency-MQA, transparency-HEI[5]
	Key stakeholders	MoE	Key stakeholders-MoE
	external audit	Clique	External audit-HEI[6]

The steps mentioned and the subsequent coding and analytical strategies were consistent with the *content analysis*, in which researchers establish a set of categories and then count the number of instances that fall into each category (Silverman, 2006). The procedure for data analysis was by first collecting the transcripts of interviews and document analysis data and putting this in one document. The next step was to see the occurring themes, descending and opposing views within and across the stakeholders.

It was important to note the significance of making clear a strategy for validating the accuracy of research findings (Creswell, 2003). Thus, this study used *member-checking* (see section 3.2.1) as well as clarifying the *bias* the researcher brings to this study as strategies to check the accuracy of the findings. Also, member-checking of interview data against the literature review was used to strengthening against possible mitigation effects. The following paragraph deals with issues of bias. Creswell (2003) states that member-checking is used to determine accuracy of the qualitative findings through verifying the final report or specific description or themes by participants. Creswell argues that the self-reflection brought by clarifying the bias, creates an open and honest narrative that will resonate well with readers.

The methodology acknowledges that the researcher's close association with the QA agency in the Maldives can cause biases in the findings. Some researchers judge participatory research as biased, impressionistic and unreliable (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995). Mehra (2002) described such bias as that of one's research interests being influenced by self preference and values. Similarly, Hammersley and Gomm, (1997) state that bias is generally seen as a negative feature, as something that can be and should be avoided. While bias is a systemic error produced by the influence of the researcher, Hammersley and Gomm argue that such presuppositions do not necessarily lead to outcome error. They argue that while the exclusive immediate goal of research is the production of knowledge, it is also recognised that research inevitably can be affected by the personal and social characteristics of the researcher and this can be positive as well as a source of systemic error (Hammersley & Gomm, 1997). Furthermore, Mehra (2002) believes that a researcher's evolving self, in terms of his or her academic career, influences the selection of a research topic so the complete avoidance of self bias may never be possible.

It is also acknowledged that it is difficult to maintain total objectivity when the researcher was an insider to the research setting, which was the case in this project. Mehra (2002) suggests that it is possible to mitigate against these biases. The researcher of this project made every effort in this regard by trying to understand the setting or context as a whole in order to make "correct" interpretations of research findings. Measures recommended by Mehra were used to monitor bias and subjectivity. These measures include recording in a notebook personal reactions to what was heard and seen in the fieldwork. This subjectivity journal is not recommended for inclusion in the thesis itself but a tool for reflection. Mehra advised a regular review of such a journal so that it will put the researcher in touch with the beliefs and biases, and in turn may help the researcher to be more "objective".

3.5 PROCEDURE AND TIMELINE

Table 3.5 shows the timeframe for data collection and analysis, reports and writing. As illustrated in the table, the collection of data occurred during the period of June 2011 to August 2011 in the Maldives.

Table 3.5

Timeframe for data collection and analysis, reports and writing

	May June 2011	**July-Sep 2011**	**Oct 2011**	**Nov-Dec 2011**	**Jan-Dec 2012**	**Jan-March 2013**	**April-May 2013**	**June 2013**	**July-August 2013**
Confirmation Seminar	x								
Complete ethical clearance/permission from EQ	x								
Refine data collection tools		x							
Data collection (fieldwork in Maldives)		x							
Transcription		x	x						
Attend two conferences to present findings					x				
Member checking, data analysis and reporting			x	x					
Writing thesis drafts:									
Drafting results and findings					x				
Drafting discussion and conclusions chapter						x			
Revising the whole thesis and updating literature						x	x		
Final editing and formatting							x		
Oral seminar								x	
Date of final submission									x

3.6 ETHICS AND LIMITATIONS

Ethics is concerned with doing good and avoiding harm (Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2000). Contemporary researchers pay much attention to ethical issues related to research investigations conducted (Merriam, 1998). Ethical considerations in the presentation of research findings and safeguarding the rights of participants have been the core issues in setting codes of ethics in social research (Diener & Crandall, 1978). Orb et al. (2000) argue that any harm, however, can be prevented or reduced through the application of appropriate ethical principles. Thus, this research was based on the principle of protection of its participants in the interviews.

Even though, "doing no harm" is the fundamental ethical principle in research, it is not always a very straightforward concept, in the sense that what constitutes harm is interpreted differently by different people at different times (Simons, 2009). Simons argues that the resulting pressure from these differences may lead to adoption of procedures and methods that are not always relevant to the research question and indeed may also lead to failure to recognise the potential harm itself.

This study was considered as low risk it did not involve any biological, physical testing of participants as it was social research. Nonetheless, ethical issues are likely to arise from the researcher-participant relationship (Merriam, 1998). Merriam (1998) argues that "ethical dilemmas are likely to emerge with regard to collection of data and in the dissemination of findings" (p. 213). The researcher of this study was a senior figure of the Maldives higher education quality body and in that capacity was working closely with most of the participants. Whilst this may imply bias, the close links did not influence the outcome of the research for two reasons: (1) the professional approach of QUT ethics approval; and (2) approval of semi-structured interviews with the ethics application and having been thoroughly examined by the confirmation committee. Other issues that may affect qualitative studies are the researcher's subjective interpretations of data and the design itself (Orb et al., 2000).

It was not expected that damaging ethical issues from data collection could occur in this study. However, it is not possible to predict how the data collection through interviews will end (Orb et al., 2000). Hence, ethical issues related to

research design, trust, and data collection needed to be anticipated and addressed along with mitigating measures.

The procedures established by Simons (2009) – that are centred around the three key concepts of *confidentiality*, *negotiation*, and *accessibility* – underpin the ethical procedures for this research:

- The purpose of the study and the anticipated audience had been made clear at the outset in Chapter One;
- Access to documents that were used for data collection occurred only after obtaining permission from authorities;
- Informed consent was sought for each person interviewed; this included key officials of MoE, MQA, industry bodies and higher education institutions;
- The interviews were conducted in confidence;
- As indicated in Section 3.2.1, use of data were negotiated with participants for accuracy, fairness, and relevance after transcription and before data analysis;
- No data were reported that a participant asked to be kept in confidence;
- Explicit permission of the respondent was sought for direct quotation and attributed judgements; and
- Pseudonyms were used in reporting individuals and institutions (Simons, 2009).

Further to Simons' strategy noted above, the QUT research ethics guidelines were followed throughout the course of this research. Therefore, ethical clearance for this study has been submitted and the ethics documents are attached in appendix G and H. The ethical considerations outlined in this section were used in the application for QUT ethical clearance. This research was intended to address issues and challenges faced by the Maldives in the area of quality assurance of higher education as a case study, any field work, document analysis, and interviews were done with formal consent of relevant authorities of the Maldives if required. All ethics requirements, according to the laws of the Maldives government, were carefully observed.

Chapter 4: Findings

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This research investigated key elements of higher education (HE) quality assurance (QA) systems, their relationships and how they may contribute towards a quality assurance model for Small States such as the Maldives. In order to achieve this, an explorative case study approach was adopted. The island nation of the Maldives was selected as the case to explore the above issues as it is representative of the typical context of Small States.

To collect data, four relevant stakeholders of higher education in the Maldives were interviewed examining and exploring the key elements and their relationships that operated within the constraints and capacities of Small States to provide higher education (HE) quality assurance (QA). The four stakeholder groups interviewed were: (1) the Ministry of Education of the Maldives (MoE); (2) the Maldives Qualifications Authority (MQA); (3) selected key higher education institutions (HEIs) in the Maldives; and (4) five leading industry associations. In addition, data were collected from significant government documents and other documents related to quality assurance in higher education in the Republic of Maldives. The document analyses were comprised of ten key documents listed in Table 3.1 and provided a secondary data source to cross validate findings derived from the interview data.

This chapter (Section 4.2) presents an analysis of participants' responses, which were grouped under key thematic areas and sub-themes (see Table 4.1). It is then followed by interpretations of the themes and sub-themes in light of the participants' responses, leading to a summary of key findings of each element. The data synthesis was guided by the quality assurance elements derived from the literature review and presented in the conceptual framework (Section 2.7.2). Some new attributes not captured by the conceptual framework that emerged from the data were also analysed and included in the findings. Section 4.4 in this chapter discusses the synthesis of the findings as a QA system.

4.2 KEY FINDINGS: ELEMENTS, THEMES AND SUB-THEMES

The findings are organised to provide articulation between the research questions and the conceptual framework. As explained in Chapter Three, the questions sought to gain an understanding of issues considered significant by each stakeholder group which were collated into themes, thus data analysis was based on stakeholder group responses. Apart from the general questions (see appendix A, B, C, D), specific follow-up questions were asked to explore the issues that were most directly associated with that particular stakeholder group.

Table 4.1 illustrates how the data were grouped around the three main elements (i.e., regulatory framework, standards, and service delivery) and how the themes, as well as sub-themes, were organised. The data analysis follows the structure outlined in Table 4.1 and it will deal with each theme and the associated sub-themes one at a time. As explained in Chapter Three, 'significant' was determined by the frequency of the issues raised by the respondents and a high level of consensus among the stakeholders. A summary of key findings is presented at the end of the discussions related to respective quality assurance elements.

Table 4.1

Key themes and sub-themes represented in the data, grouped around the three main elements

Elements	Key Themes	Sub-themes
Regulatory Framework	Legislation	Education Law – inclusion of HE and QA Use of department mandates to govern in the absence of a law
	Governance	Autonomy – operational/ finance Representativeness Conflict of interest Transparency of the governance
	Organisational Structure	Single national body – one tier system
Standards	Process of setting standards	guidelines Stakeholder involvement in developing guidelines Transparency of setting standards
	Scope of standards	Global rankings Industry linkages
Service Delivery	Accreditation	Institutional accreditation Programme accreditation
	Academic audit	Institutional audit Program audit
	Transparency of the services	----------
	Collaboration in service delivery	----------

4.2.1 Regulatory framework.

The conceptual framework identified regulatory framework as one of the elements within a QA system. In considering this element, the data were analysed around the following key themes identified in the literature: (1) Legislation; (2) Governance; and (3) Organisational Structure. The objective of this analysis was to investigate how the Maldives stakeholders understood the role and function of a regulatory framework within a HE quality assurance system. The sub-themes indentified for each of the above noted key themes are presented in Table 4.1. Each of the key themes and its respective sub-themes are examined in detail below.

4.2.1.1 Theme: Legislation.

Data analysis revealed there were two sub-themes based around legislation, namely: (1) legal Act; and (2) department mandates. Table 4.2 presents key findings derived from the responses of the stakeholders, grouped around the sub-themes under legislation. As there was no direct question asked to the stakeholders regarding the legal Act, this information surfaced as part of interview question number two to MoE (Appendix A) and MQA (see Appendix B), question number three to HEIs stakeholder group (see Appendix C) and question number two to Industry (Appendix D), and was considered significant because of repeated references to it.

Table 4.2

Sub-themes and issues around the theme legislation

Sub-themes	Underlying issues	Data sources
Legal Act	Presidential decree	MQA, HEI[6], HEI[7], Industry[3], Industry[4]
	enforcement of QA framework through legislation	MQA, MoE, Industry[3]
	moderate influence from outside parties	HEI[5], HEI[8], HEI[9]
Department mandates	the change in the MQA mandate	MoE, MQA, Document[3]
	key functions of the MQA	MoE, Industry[5], Document[6]

*Refer to Appendix F Table F.1 for the actual data.

All stakeholders were asked about the current legislative arrangement in the Maldives for higher education quality assurance as part of the interview protocol on the current regulatory framework. However, it is important at this point to note that,

as mentioned in Chapter One, an analysis of the government documents confirmed that the Maldives did not have a National Education Law (International Bureau of Education, 2011). In the Maldives, the practice is to govern by what is called 'department mandate'. Thus, as shown in Table 4.2 under the sub-theme Legal Act, there was recognition from all stakeholder groups that there was a need for some legislation to make the higher education quality assurance system robust and able to perform its function without undue interference.

Legal Act.

Three issues emerged from the data analysis (document and interview) under the sub-theme Legal Act. They were: (1) Presidential decree; (2) enforcement of QA framework through legislation; and (3) influence from outside parties. Data analysis indicated that the current regulatory set-up for higher education quality assurance in the Maldives was governed by a Presidential decree. For instance, MQA made it clear that the MQA was functioning "under the rights given to the President". This arrangement was considered appropriate by the HEIs stakeholder. For example, HEI[7] said such an arrangement was "not much of an issue" because the "directive, which was issued by the President covers all those areas". Though he did not make it clear what those directives were. Similarly, HEI[6] noted that, even without "legislative power", institutions do "whatever the government policy ask them to be implemented". On the other hand, the MQA stressed that without a "straight forward law that actually articulates quality issues in higher education [it] cannot sometimes be understood clearly by the public". MQA went further suggesting that institutions can exploit the situation where there are no legally-based directives. The industry stakeholder group seems to agree on this but were not very certain about how this may be operationalised. For example, Industry[3] indicated that Presidential decrees could also mean "other motives coming" in and often means "political influence", which may not be in the best interest for regulating the HE system for improving the quality.

With regards to progress on adopting a legal framework to support the enforcement of a QA framework through legislation, the MQA pointed out that there was some progress being made to introduce a legal framework for higher education quality assurance. According to MQA, this progress was through "an initial draft [MQA Act] in parliament [and] also an Education Act submitted by a private

member, [in which the] higher education component [was] embedded". However, MQA did not elaborate on how these two acts govern QA in HE—this is understandable as these pieces of legislations are still in draft form and awaiting debate and discussion in Parliament. It was pointed out that "a national QA framework will be enforceable only if an Act of Parliament is passed" (MoE). This argument was supported by Industry stakeholders; for instance, Industry[3] suggested that with "a Parliamentary Statutory Act coming in means that everyone has to follow a [formal] system".

Finally, the issue of external influence in decision making was noted as a significant challenge for implementing QA for higher education. Thus, the support for legislation by the HEI stakeholder group was high and they argued that it can help moderate the external influence on the QA decision making process. For instance, HEI[5] claimed that when things are not regulated through "[any] legal system, people always try to influence". Also, the need for "legal powers" to be instilled at the national regulatory body for higher education quality assurance was suggested by HEI[9], so that, "they are not influenced by other outside parties". Similarly, HEI[8] stressed the need for "a [Parliament] Act" in order to avoid the "political influencing [of] the board and how it operates". Thus, as can be evidenced in the above discussion, there is strong support for having some sort of legal framework to support the MQA implement and regulate the QA requirements for the HE sector.

Department mandates.

As illustrated in Table 4.2, issues around the sub-theme 'department mandates' that emerged from data analysis were: (1) key functions of the MQA, and (2) the change in the MQA mandate. The data analysis showed that in the absence of any legislation or proper national policies in higher education quality assurance, the department mandate is the policy document that is currently being followed. Further probing the MoE and MQA stakeholders regarding the current QA policies and regulations used for managing QA in higher education, they had more to say than the other stakeholder groups. They explained that the Maldives Accreditation Board (MAB) was created in 2000 by a Presidential decree as were its department mandates (President's Office [Maldives], 2010). The participant from MoE highlighted the fact that the mandate of the board had been "changed from that of

advisory to regulatory [role]". However, the official mandate of the MQA referred to the board as "a governing board" (Document[3]). Despite two different terminologies (regulatory and governing respectively) used by the MoE participant and Document[3], the QA agency's board changed from advisory to a more assertive role. Since the Document[3] is the official MQA mandate, the term governing board can be accepted as the best description of the MQA board.

An analysis of the MQA mandate (Document[3]) showed it has five key functions that were summarised by the MQA stakeholder:

> the first function is to develop and implement the Maldives National Qualifications Framework. Second function is to develop and implement standards for quality assurance in HEIs. The third function is that of [international and national] certificate validation. The fourth function is that of approval of academic programmes and the fifth function is the quality supervision and the quality audit function (MQA).

These functions, together with nine other functions of the Maldives Accreditation Board (MAB) which was the previous QA agency, were also included in the MQA mandate. Referring to this mandate, MQA thought that in its current form it has "to wear too many hats". MQA felt that, at that moment, it was "a regulatory body; a consultative [body]; a professional development agency". Therefore, MQA suggested that it should become "a truly regulatory agency". What MQA meant by truly regulatory was focusing on monitoring and regulatory functions only and doing this well. For instance, MQA stated that "we [currently review] a whole lot of organisational self-regulation [reports by] various stakeholders. Therefore, those roles [that are self-regulated should be] shed by the MQA gradually to the competent [professional] authorities". However, currently, it appears that distributing roles to different organisations reporting to a central body such as the MQA is not appreciated. Hence, understanding of different entities performing different tasks of the QA system and how they complement each other is not fully appreciated by MQA. This leads to the discussion that a well-developed one-tier system with clearly defined roles and functions of different entities may be the a good option as analysed in Section 4.2.1.3 – *One tier system*.

Related to the issue of changes in the mandate of the MQA, a point was raised by Industry[5] that the original "mandate of the Accreditation Board (referring to MAB

now MQA)" was to make sure that "all the inputs that have to go into the higher education programs could be measured, evaluated, assessed by the Accreditation Board". Therefore, the argument of Industry[5] was that the original mandate was "quality control mechanism of higher education rather than qualification monitoring (referring to certificate validation)". Hence, Industry[5] found this focus on qualifications "a little narrower than the accreditation concept". The issue of the narrow focus on accreditation [quality assurance] appears to be true given the slow speed in implementing major functions of QA such as academic audit and full accreditation – see further analysis in section 4.2.3. However, as examined previously, it is important to note that the MAB and MQA mandate includes certificate validation, which is a less important but time-consuming function of a QA system but can take up a lot of time. Therefore, implying that certificate validation was not in the original mandate is misleading, but the question as to whether it should remain there is a valid one. This misunderstanding about what is in the mandate, is a clear example of how different stakeholders misunderstand the QA functions and how it is implemented in the Maldives. Addressing this issue of core functions of a QA agency, Document[6] proposed that "adoption of the principles and practices of the Bologna Process" can facilitate "strengthening the quality of assurance regime". Towards achieving this goal, Document[6] recommended: "restructuring the organization so that its three core functions are placed in separate [organisational] units: the first managing the Maldives National Qualifications Framework (MNQF); the second monitoring licensing [registration] and accrediting HE providers; and the third carrying out external quality assurance reviews". Such a restructuring can help MQA to carry out its "more strategic quality assurance and quality enhancement function" (Document[6]).

4.2.1.2 Theme: Governance.

For this theme, data were collated under four sub-themes namely: (1) autonomy; (2) representativeness; (3) conflict of interest; and (4) transparency in policy formulation. Table 4.3 presents key findings derived from the responses of the stakeholders on governance and the sub-theme and underlying issues.

Table 4.3

Sub-themes and issues around the theme governance

Sub-themes	Underlying issues	Data sources
Autonomy	The nature of MQA's independence	Document[3], MoE, HEI[2], HEI[4], HEI[5], HEI[6], HEI[8]
	external influence	HEI[1], HEI[5], HEI[6], HEI[8,] MoE,
	nature of influence	MQA, HEI[7], HEI[8], Document[3]
Representativeness	Board membership	HEI[2], HEI[5], HEI[6], HEI[7], MoE, Document[6]
	Equal representation in the board	HEI[6], HEI[7], HEI[8]
Conflict of interest	Individual interests	HEI[1], HEI[6], HEI[9]
Transparency in policy formulation	Processes and procedures	MQA, Industry[1], HEI[6], HEI[7], HEI[8]

*Refer to Appendix F Table F.2 for the actual data.

Autonomy.

The stakeholders were questioned about the notion of autonomy of a national quality assurance body. The stakeholders used the terms *autonomy* and *independence* interchangeably to discuss the importance of unbiased decision making by the QA agency which they believed can happen only if the agency is independent of any political or other influences. As illustrated in Table 4.3, four issues emerged around the sub-theme autonomy, namely: (1) the nature of MQA's independence; (2) political and other influences; and (3) the nature of influence.

Despite the Maldives Qualifications Authority (MQA) being recognised as an independent regulatory body under the Ministry of Education (Document[3]), MoE and the majority of the HEIs stakeholder group (HEI[2], HEI[4], HEI[5], HEI[6], HEI[8]) indicated that it should have independence—suggesting there was a disconnect between the Government documents and what was perceived by the stakeholders. For instance, HEI[5] was adamant about the need for independence of the national regulatory body: "MQA has to be an independent body, which no one can influence". Similarly, HEI[9] claimed that such a body "should not be influenced by within (sic) the ministry or the powerful people in the private higher education sector or the national university". This suggests there may be much influence that comes from the private sector through lobbying the politicians. The MoE also outlined that "QA mechanisms and

agencies should be as independent as possible from the State authorities and non State agencies and institutions (MOE)". The above discussion, gives the impression that independence from external parties was seen by most stakeholders as an ideal form of autonomy. HEI[2] sums this up by saying that "conclusions and recommendations made in their [QA] reports cannot be influenced by third parties such as higher education institutions, ministries or other stakeholders". In an overtly political stance, the MQA outlined that it would be "wonderful to have independence as such" but also questioned the feasibility of having such independence in a Small [Island] State. MQA also seemed unclear about the concept of independence as can be noted in their statement "but then independence for what? We are not a political entity as such. We are a technical entity". MQA is a technical entity, yet separating the core role and function by the members of the MQA seems to remain a challenge

The second issue that arose was external influence on the QA agency. If the QA agency is independent, then how are the stakeholder groups represented? While the QA agency may be independent, membership biases can influence decision making. For instance, HEI[6] stated that the current MQA board was "heavily influenced by some dominant board members as well as political figures. So, I don't think it's healthy for higher education or education in general, when it is influenced by political figures. It should be independent". The claim was supported by half of the HEIs stakeholder groups (HEI[1], HEI[5], HEI[6], HEI[8]) and MoE. Perhaps the most serious claim was from HEI[8] who said the board was "influenced by the President's Office". In support of the above claim HEI[5] stated that "I have already seen some of the influence that is coming in". On the other hand, public HEIs accused private colleges of trying "to serve their own interests in the board" (HEI[1]).

Whilst the concept of autonomy was appreciated by participants, the nature of autonomy also seemed to be crucial for both MQA and the HEI stakeholders (HEI[7], HEI[8]). The MQA appeared to appreciate the possibilities of the MQA gaining independence but also cautioned that it may not be possible to gain full autonomy "if we can work with independence without political interference, whether semi-autonomous status is fine by me, I think". This remark seem to imply that stakeholder MQA was proposing functional independence since financial independence will always be difficult in Small States due to small size of client base. The practicality of the nature of independence was explained by Document[3]. MQA

mandate states that it is "an independent regulatory authority that is connected to the Ministry of Education" (Document[3]). This is an indication that MQA has autonomy in decision-making, but does not have structural independence and has to channel its entire decision making through the Minister of Education. However, as analysed in this section, there are serious issues raised by the stakeholders on the nature of this autonomy. As shown in the section on the *Legal Act*, legislation is needed to protect the functional independence of the quality assurance agency and also provide a means for public transparency. Such a piece of legislation, that encompasses necessary roles and functions, will also provide a mechanism for an appeals process outside the MQA. On the other hand, HEI[8] stated that they "prefer total independence but that can also lead to issues [such as] bribery". However, with this recognition of possible drawbacks with full independence, HEI[8] still argued that the "MQA actually be de-attached from the ministry, because currently that is what is happening". Also, HEI[8] emphasised that "politically influencing a quality assurance body is a very unethical, unprofessional and also quite dangerous thing to happen". These statements reinforce why legislation is needed so people can take such matters to court if the agency is not transparent.

Representativeness of the MQA Board.

The issue of representativeness of MQA board emerged as the stakeholders responded to the question on the change of MAB to MQA. In this sub-theme, two issues emerged from the data analysis: (1) composition of the board membership; and (2) equal representation in the board. Over half of the HEIs stakeholder group (HEI[2], HEI[5], HEI[6], HEI[7]) and the MoE noted the inclusion of private HEIs in the board membership as a positive change. For example, HEI[2] noted that "formation of the board with representations from both public and private sector HEIs meant that a QA body gets the viewpoints of both public and private sector in their decision making". Inclusion of the private HEI on the board was also noted by HEI[6] who noticed the change in "the board profile" in which "they are now willing to include the private sector in the board". The MoE pointed out that these changes reflected the government's "intention of being democratic and strengthening the regulatory aspects of quality of higher education providers". A suggestion noted in Document[6] is that a means "to be demonstrably up to international standards" was "encouraging institutional governing bodies and boards (such as the MQA) to have members from

other countries". Conceptually this may be sound, but in reality, the cost implications and availability can make this strategy prohibitive. For now, addressing the issue of equal representation of local stakeholders may be sufficient.

Even with the inclusion of private colleges in the board membership, the issue of equal representation did not fade away. Three participants from the HEIs stakeholder group (HEI[6], HEI[7], HEI[8]) expressed their concerns on equal representation in the board. The criticism of board membership was mostly regarding "issues in electing members for the board" where the concern was the lack of "equal opportunities among the private sector education providers" (HEI[8]). Not all HEIs were represented on the board; only a select group was involved who represented the views of their respective constituency. On this issue, HEI[8] suggested that "either you give equal representation to all HEI stakeholder groups or you find totally independent people and put on the board". This issue of equal representation seemed a complex issue to address, especially with existence of varying interests of different colleges, as indicated by their conflict of interest in the following section.

Conflict of interest of MQA board members.

The issue of conflict of interest emerged as a sub-theme, when the stakeholders responded to questions on conflict of interest, independence of the MQA board and improvements after MQA's restructure. As illustrated in Table 4.3, the data analysis revealed the underlying issue of individual interests around the sub-theme, conflict of interest.

The HEI stakeholder group noted conflict of interest as an issue. It appeared from the data analysis that while inviting private HEIs to the board might have, as analysed in the previous section, increased the transparency of MQA processes, it also risked creating more disagreement and also creating space for individual interests to creep into the system. For instance, the HEI[1] (National University) saw conflict of interest arising from the way the board functioned due to the constant disagreements caused by "individual HEI interests" (HEI[1]). HEI[6] noted that these "individual interests" mostly stemmed from the fact that some members of the board, as heads of "their own institutions", considered that their individual HEIs interests were "of more concern" to them. The influence of "dominant members" was also seen as a conflict of interest because they were "backed by political figures" (HEI[1]). It was also acknowledged that in Small States when "everybody knows each other

very well", there will be "some sort of influence" and conflict of interest" (HEI[9]). This may be a reality of the nature of Small States as Stella (2010) notes that "clarity in line of reporting and avoidance of conflicts of interests are weak in many Small States" (p. 33)

When looking at a solution to this issue of conflict of interest, HEI[6] suggested that the board members "shouldn't have conflicting interests" but how to achieve this was not discussed.

Transparency in policy formulation.

The attribute, transparency, will be analysed and discussed throughout the three elements identified in this study. Under the element, regulatory framework, transparency is referred to as transparency of decision-making in which all stakeholders are aware of the processes and procedures. As illustrated in Table 4.3, the underlying issue that emerged from the data analysis around the sub-theme, transparency of policy formulation, was the decision making processes and procedures.

According to the MQA, the notion of transparency of a higher education quality assurance agency in terms of its policy formulation appeared to be related to "unbiased decision-making" through adoption of clearly defined processes that are consistently used by MQA, often referred to as "standard operating procedures" (SOPs). This need for publicly available standard operational procedures (SOP) was also noted by stakeholder groups, HEIs and Industry (Industry[1], HEI[7]). For example, Industry[1] emphasised that "they would have to show (what are) the procedures, which they would like to follow". Perhaps the preferred method was "the processes that are written down and published and available for all concerned the better" (HEI[7]).

While dissemination of information regarding establishment and implementation of SOPs to the public was noted in the data analysis as critical for transparency of policy formulation, there was some concern by HEI stakeholders on how those policies and decisions are made. For example, HEI[6] pointed out that "it's not transparent at all. Everything comes as a surprise". In addition to that, HEI[8] noted "we come to know that the board is making amendment after amendment to the MNQF has been [made] and this was not communicated to us properly". These extracts illustrate that HEIs are not very clear about how QA decisions are made and

not involved in the process. When the above concern was presented to MQA and MOE, there was no explanation by either of them regarding how the decisions were made. This lack of transparency of decision-making may have lead to dissatisfaction, at least in some quarters of the HEIs stakeholder. This was expressed by HEI[6] by saying "I am not too happy with the changes that have been introduced this year [2011]".

4.2.1.3 Theme: Organisational structure.

Debate continues to centre around the issue of organisational structure. In particular, consensus appears to be for a one tier system, which is also strengthening the argument for a single strong national body for higher education quality assurance. This is particularly relevant in a Small State context where the cost of multiple departments dealing with quality issues can be prohibitive. Table 4.4 presents key findings derived from the responses of the stakeholders on organisational structure, sub-themes and underlying issues.

Table 4.4

Sub-themes and issues around the theme organisational structure

Sub-themes	Underlying issues	Data sources
One-tier system	Current organisational structure	MQA, MoE, HEI[3], HEI[4], HEI[5], HEI[7], HEI[8], HEI[9], Industry[1] Industry[3]
	Benefits of one-tier system	HEI[5], HEI[8], HEI[9,] MoE,
	Suitability of one-tier system for Small Stats	MoE, HEI[2], HEI[7], HEI[8], Industry[3]
	Two-tier system is duplication	HEI[3], HEI[7], Industry[3]

*Refer to Appendix F Table F.3 for the actual data.

One tier system.

The stakeholders were asked about their thoughts and suggestions regarding the best option for organisational structure for a QA agency for the Maldives. As shown in table 4.4, the responses were clustered around issues under this sub-theme: (1) current organisational structure; (2) one-tier system is the way forward; (3) benefits of one-tier system; (4) suitability of one-tier system for Small States; and (5) fragmented system leads to duplication.

MQA and HEI stakeholders acknowledged that the current organisational arrangement for the Maldives higher education quality assurance system was indeed one-tier. For instance, MQA explained that they have "taken the right step in the one-tier system. Once again given the geography and the economic situation here, I think we have to move ahead in this particular way". All four stakeholders, MQA, MoE, HEIs (HEI[4], HEI[5], HEI[7], HEI[8], HEI[9]), and Industry (Industry[1] Industry[3]), strongly advocated for a one-tier system. Industry[3] made it clear that they "would firmly support the idea of a one-tier system". Similar sentiments were echoed by others such as HEI[5] who said that "the best way is the higher education quality system to be looked after or maintained by one particular body". MQA noted "geography and economic situation" as a reason to move forward with the current one-tier system.

The stakeholder groups HEIs and MoE suggested there will be benefits from having a one-tier system. For instance, HEI[9] suggested a one-tier system can be better suited "to monitor [and] set national standards". HEI[9] also pointed out "it will also give a single direction for everyone". MoE and HEI stakeholders pointed to the benefits by weighing the one tier option against the backdrop of not having a one-tier system. They highlighted the suitability of a one-tier system for the Maldives as a Small State where human resources and economic capacity are limited. For instance, HEI[8] noted that "the size and the number of the institutions in the Maldives" meant a one tier system would be suitable. Other reasons highlighted by the stakeholders involved the lack of financial resources "to set up too many institutional mechanisms" (MoE) in a Small State like the Maldives, the lack of "human resources" (HEI[7]) and a "lack of expertise" (HEI[2]) or capacity in the HEIs needed for an agency to guide and support the HE in its growth and development.

The negatives of a fragmented system or not having a one-tier system were noted by the HEIs and Industry stakeholder groups. This was largely associated with the "duplication of work" (Industry[3]) that will occur in such a scenario. HEI[7] also noted the issue of duplication by saying "we don't have resources to duplicate". Also, it was indicated that when there is more than one body, "people will not have confidence in which one to choose" (HEI[3]). These sentiments expressed by the stakeholders point to possible drawbacks by having a two-tier system and thereby support strengthening the current one-tier system.

4.2.1.4 Summary.

Legislation, governance and organisational structure emerged as themes under the element of regulatory framework. To sum up the discussion on the data analysis under this element, the following issues were considered significant and are re-emphasised here. Under the theme legislation, it was revealed that lack of legislation to regulate the higher education quality assurance in the Maldives was a pressing issue. In the current situation, the department mandate was used as the policy document which does not allow any legal basis or process of appealing the decisions outside the MQA processes. Though the MQA mandate says it is an autonomous entity, this was not how the majority of the stakeholders perceived its roles and functions.

Under the theme governance, several sub-themes emerged: autonomy, representativeness of the MQA board, conflict of interest of MQA board members and transparency in policy formulation. As for the autonomy, the issue raised by the stakeholders highlights the difference between financial, structural, and functional (or decision-making) independence. The data analysis suggested that in the case of a Small State such as the Maldives, gaining financial independence is not realistic because of the small scale of the student population and the higher education sector. However, the stakeholders appeared to realise that functional and structural independence can be achieved through legislation and organisational reform. The issue of the membership of the QA agency's regulatory board was also considered an important issue particularly by the HEI stakeholders. Inclusion of the private HEIs was noted as a positive development; however the issue of equal and fair representation was still challenged. This was due to varying interests of HEIs which also lead to a conflict of interest. In terms of the transparency in policy formulation, the stakeholders appear to know little about the process of how and why the key decisions about QA are made by the government. To streamline and increase the efficiency and the effectiveness, one-tier system for the organisational structure for a QA agency was supported by the stakeholders. Data analysis indicated that a one-tier system is better suited to the Maldives as a Small State instead of having a complex and fragmented QA system.

4.2.2 Minimum quality standards.

'Standards' is the second element in the conceptual framework (Section 2.7.2). However, after data analysis, this element was rephrased as 'Minimum Quality Standards' to better align with the comments of the participants. The interview and document data analysis both supported the significance of minimum quality standards within a QA system since quality assurance can only be implemented if there are agreed minimum standards. The themes that fall under this element are: (1) process of setting guidelines for addressing minimum standards; and (2) the scope of standards—what should the standards cover?

4.2.2.1 Theme: Process of setting standards.

Data analysis revealed three sub-themes under the theme of process of developing guidelines: (1) guidelines; (2) stakeholder involvement in developing guidelines; and (3) transparency of the process of setting standards. Table 4.5 presents key findings derived from the responses of the stakeholders on the process of setting standards and the associated sub-themes and underlying issues.

Table 4.5

Sub-themes and issues around the theme process of setting standards

Sub-themes	Underlying issues	Data sources
Standards and guidelines	Important standards and guidelines	HEI[2], HEI[3], Docuemnt[1], Document[6], Document[10]
	Current status of developing standards and guidelines	MQA, HEI[5], HEI[7], Industry[2,] Docuemnt[1]
Stakeholder involvement in setting standards	Engage with stakeholders	HEI[4], HEI[7], MQA,
Transparency of the process of setting standards	Standards that need to be communicated to the general public	HEI[3], HEI[8], HEI[9], Industry[1], Industry[4]
	Methods of transparency	HEI[8], HEI[9], Industry[4]

*Refer to Appendix F Table F.4 for the actual data.

Standards and guidelines.

The new developments with regards to the Maldives National Qualifications Framework (MNQF) were received by the stakeholders with recognition that it is a step forward to strengthen the HE QA in the country. For example, there was recognition from HEIs that the revised MNQF with its level descriptors will help

streamline national standards (HEI[3]). Correspondingly, the MNQF was described "as a key step to promote international benchmarking of the qualifications" (Document[1]) with its adaptation of the level descriptors of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF). Also HEI[3] noted the new TVET standards which are called "national competency standards" (Document[10]) can "make it easier for institutions to develop program standards for their qualifications. Since, HEI[3] belongs to an institution that offers TVET level programs, this is an indication that the new competency standards for levels one, two, three and four of the MNQF, which were developed by the TVET Maldives (Document[10]), are contributing to strengthen the HE QA regime with respect to standards needed. The stakeholders' mention of the implementation of the revised MNQF indicated that in fact it was more than a standard or guideline, but a national framework in its pure meaning that guides the whole higher education sector in the country. However, it is important to note that this is only one framework and the QA would need more minimum requirements to deliver the QA processes such as registration, accreditation and academic audit.

The stakeholders were asked about what support and necessary documents they required to understand and respond to QA requirements. MoE and HEIs stakeholder (HEI[2]) stressed the importance of having detailed documents outlining the requirements and the process for higher education quality assurance system. For instance, MoE stressed the importance of "guidelines for both internal and external [quality] review". Similarly, HEIs stakeholders emphasised "how institutions use their internal procedures should be documented by the agency" (HEI[2]) and also provide a list of documents as requested for external quality processes. These include: "criteria for decisions, reporting procedure, follow-up procedures, periodic reviews [and] system-wide analysis" (HEI[2]).

Stakeholder MQA was asked about what procedural guidelines were in place. As a response, MQA advised that "a lot of these documents on quality, quality assurance and quality audit were in place with the announcement of MNQF 2009 on 1st September 2009". However, the HEIs stakeholder group commented that some of these "documents for quality assurance" were "just taken from the internet" (HEI[7]) with little relevance to the local context. This was not a reference to the original process of the developing a revised MNQF, but subsequent minor changes after agreeing on the original document as well a reference to the drafts made by the MQA

for academic audit. This assertion by HEI[7] can be interpreted as a negative process for adaptation of guidelines from other countries. The industry stakeholder group's view was contrary to the view of HEIs stakeholder. Industry[2] argued that when it comes to developing guidelines, instead of "re-inventing the wheel", the system should be "keeping with what the other countries are doing" but also customising to address the "local situation".

Though the stakeholders did not point to the program/ category standards, available documents suggest that there is a process called developing national competency standards. For instance, Document[10] indicates that national competency standards in the Maldives were developed by TVET Maldives and are not part of the national HE QA system. Though they provide program standards for some sectors, these competency standards are described as the base for Competency Based Skill Training (CBST) (Document[10]), which results in technical and vocational qualifications (Document[6]). Since these standards are developed only for vocational level qualifications, this process does not have a mechanism to develop program/ category standards for qualifications at diploma level and above.

Stakeholder involvement in setting standards.

The sub-theme of setting standards emerged when the participants responded to various questions related to the current QA arrangement and a review of key documents, roles and functions of MQA. Data analysis revealed the underlying issue of engaging with the stakeholders around this sub-theme.

The idea of engaging the national quality assurance agency or MQA with the stakeholders was proposed particularly by the HEI stakeholders. For example, HEI[7] asked "instead of MQA trying to struggle on its own to do these things, why don't they engage the institutes"? HEI[4] pointed that this type of engagement means "the agency or the authority can also develop with the institutes; with the colleges; with the university". HEI[4] further elaborated that this collaborative arrangement would give the stakeholders "some kind of ownership of some of the standards". Interestingly, this sort of engagement with the stakeholders was underlined by the stakeholder MQA saying that "our philosophy is that we grow together". However, it appears, based on the above observation made by HEI stakeholders that the intention of the MQA is not being materialised. MQA insisted that "these documents have been generated with a lot of consultations with the public and private service

providers and we have regular workshops to actually work with the institutions and actually update this". The sentiment expressed above by the HEIs stakeholder indicate that what MQA may be expecting is not what is happening in reality, despite having set up workshops to encourage consultation on a regular basis. Any critiques regarding stakeholder involvement in standard-setting were deflected by the MQA participant as simply "major pressure groups" yet again lobbying to influence the decisions. The unwillingness of the MQA to accept that there was no regular consultation with other stakeholders can be a sign of highly centralised and controlled processes lacking transparency. Probing further to verify the above contrasting observation was not possible with the scope of this study but has the potential to be a suggestion for a future study. Some of this discussion will be picked up again under the theme, collaboration, which will be presented in Section 4.2.3.

Transparency of the process of setting standards.

Transparency of the process of setting standards emerged as an important sub-theme when the stakeholders were questioned about their views on the importance of making the guidelines and minimum quality standards development process transparent and open to public scrutiny. As illustrated in Table 4.5, data analysis revealed two issues under this sub-theme: (1) standards that need to be communicated to the general public; and (2) methods of ensuring transparency.

The data analysis showed that communication between the QA agency and the stakeholders and the availability of documents to the public were important to make it a transparent process. For example, the HEIs stakeholders explained that "for the transparency, I think whatever standards MQA set or whatever documents they have, in their system, it has to be communicated to the general public (HEI^{9})". HEIs stakeholders also recommended other documents that should be publically available were "all the rules and regulations [as well as] anything that refers to; that involves the colleges or the institutions (HEI^{8})". The Industry stakeholder group noted that the types of documents that need to be made publically available should include "procedural manuals" ($Industry^{1}$). The industry stakeholders employ the graduates thus the standards should reflect what is required in specific industries. The HEIs and Industry stakeholders (HEI^{8}, HEI^{9}, $Industry^{4}$) proposed the methods through which these standard documents can be made available to the public, specifically:

> it should be available on MQA website; it should be available from other educational forums through which people can read and/or download. This kind of transparency must be there just to ensure that the MQA is a trusted body on which people can rely (HEI[9]).

Industry[4] added "it should be available through leaflets or through their [MQA] website". To sum up, HEIs and Industry stakeholder groups in particular, raised the issue of transparency of the process of setting standards. The HEIs may have raised the issue of transparency of the standards process as they have to comply with these standards and the lack of transparency and access to the compliance documents is a concern to them. Hence, the data analysis indicated that by making the documents and guidelines available to the public in various means can bolster the image of the MQA and increase the trust of the stakeholders.

4.2.2.2 Theme: Scope of standards.

The sub-themes that emerged from the data analysis under the theme of scope of standards were: (1) quality of higher education; (2) global rankings; and (3) industry linkages. Table 4.6 presents key finding derived from the responses of the stakeholders on the scope of standards, sub-theme and underlying issues.

Table 4.6

Sub-themes and issues around the theme scope of standards

Sub-themes	Underlying issues	Data sources
Quality of higher education	Graduate numbers and programs	Industry[1], Industry[3]
	Content and delivery	Industry[1], Industry[2], Industry[3], Document[1], HEI[3]
Global rankings	Ranking concept	HEI[2], HEI[3], HEI[4], HEI[6], HEI[7], HEI[8], HEI[9]
	Rankings as a benchmark and guide	HEI[2], HEI[3], HEI[4], HEI[7]
	Regional rankings	HEI[5], HEI[8], HEI[9]
Industry linkages	Nature of industry involvement	Industry1, Industry[2], Industry[3]
	Importance of industry linkages	Industry1, Industry[4], MQA, Document[1]

*Refer to Appendix F Table F.5 for the actual data.

Quality of higher education.

The sub-theme quality of higher education was mainly discussed by the Industry stakeholder group, particularly in reference to the quality of graduates coming out of the HE system. The data analysis found three issues around this sub-theme: (1) graduate numbers and programs; (2) academic nature of the system; and (3) content and delivery. These sub-themes are illustrated in table 4.6.

The industry stakeholder group was the most interested stakeholder group regarding the supply of qualified graduates and the relevance of the academic programs. For instance, industry stakeholder participants (Industry[1], Industry[3]) were concerned about the fact that "there are not enough graduates coming out especially in the field of Business Management, Accounting and para-professional in the industrial and business fields" (Industry[3]). They felt that "the need of the industry has been undermined" due to the fact that the focus of "the quality of higher education in the Maldives is based on [academic] merit" (Industry[1]).

All the industry stakeholders (Industry[1], Industry[2], Industry[3]) indicated that with this issue there was the underlying problem of the mindset of the graduates. For instance, Industry[3] mentioned that "your attitude, your mind set...all this needs to change and should be part of the quality indicators". Similarly, Industry[1] reiterated "I would say not only the content and the quality, but the mindset as well" should be considered as a QA indicator. This indicates an additional indicator of QA which is the level of preparedness of graduates for employment. The concerns raised by the Industry stakeholders suggested weak linkages between the HEIs and the industry bodies. Related to this, the new MNQF's level descriptors have five areas of learning outcomes, from which the area of "accountability and working with others (Document[1])" appeared to be addressing the issue of work ethics. So, with the revised MNQF, the HEIs are obliged to prepare their academic programs with content that meets this standard, which includes capabilities such as working with others.

Global rankings.

This sub-theme was raised mainly by the HEI stakeholder groups when they were questioned about their view on international standards. Three issues that emerged around the sub-theme global rankings were: (1) Ranking concept, (2)

Rankings as a benchmark, and (3) Regional rankings. Table 4.6 presents a summary of the responses of the stakeholder groups on these issues.

All the HEIs stakeholder group with the exception of HEI[1] expressed their understanding of the underlying issue of the ranking concept. For instance HEI[3] said that "the ranking concept is good" and in his view, the "criticisms come not on the rankings, but how it's being done". HEI[6] also supported the global ranking noting that he was "in favour of these global rankings". Similarly, HEI[2] noted "the global rankings are important for developing universities to set their standards". However, whether HEIs in a Small State like the Maldives can meet the minimum standards for being considered in these global rankings is questionable and perhaps not fully appreciated by the HEI stakeholders. While some argued in support for the ranking concept, HEI[8] highlighted a negative point about these rankings saying it is a "marketing gimmick [for industrialised countries]" (HEI[8]). Also, there was cynicism among a few HEIs stakeholders who stressed the point that elite universities were promoted by the global ranking system. For example, HEI[7] said "I don't think it serves any purpose [for Maldives HE], it contributes to an elite concept of universities". HEI[7] elaborated by saying that these "elite universities [such as Harvard, Oxford and Cambridge] had access to huge amounts of resources and therefore had a competitive advantage over others, making it hard to break that circle". HEI[9] questioned whether global rankings are "done just to make western people and American[s] happy to ensure their supremacy in the world".

Whilst talking in favour of rankings, HEIs stakeholder group (HEI[2], HEI[3], HEI[4], HEI[7]) indicated that the global rankings can be used as a benchmark for universities and as guide for students and parents. For instance, HEI[4] explained "when you look at the world rankings, it gives you some idea" and for him, "it guides people". HEI[3] stated that while "a lot of people work in multi-national companies you have to have benchmarking in a global village" (HEI[3]). HEI[3] argued that "if you benchmark against one of the universities then you can also develop more". Benchmarking against global universities may sound attractive, but it is questionable whether reaching the same standards is for Small States. Furthermore, the participants seemed to be confused about international benchmarking and international ranking. Competing with highly ranked universities globally may be wishful thinking is a Small State context like the Maldives with minimal resources.

Even though the criteria used were fair, the lack of inclusion of universities from "3rd world countries" (HEI[9]) was an issue. Hence, there was support from the HEI stakeholders for a separate ranking for 3rd world countries or regional and country rankings. For instance, HEI[5] argued that "they can have like regional ranking and/or national ranking in [the] Maldives ....we can have only the Maldives [HEIs] ranking within the Maldives". This was supported by HEI[8] by saying "maybe they (3rd world countries) should also think of something else and they should come up with their own ranking also". Perhaps the focus should be on how this local ranking can help lower performing HEIs to lift their quality.

Industry linkages.

The industry stakeholder group was asked about their views regarding how to strengthen the Maldivian higher education QA system. The MQA stakeholder gave information regarding the employers of the graduates of the HE institutions when asked about emerging developments in higher education in the Maldives. Document[1] also provided relevant information on this sub-theme. As illustrated in Table 4.6, the data analysis revealed two issues around this sub-theme: (1) nature of industry involvement; and (2) importance of industry linkages.

The majority of the industry stakeholders (Industry1, Industry[2], Industry[3]) talked about the nature of industry involvement in the overall higher education quality assurance. From the responses it appeared that currently there were very minimal linkages between the industry and the higher education institutions generally and especially with the quality assurance sector. For instance, Industry[3] said "I don't think the MQA system even recognises the importance of the industries yet they employ the graduates. I think we are at a very infant stage of realising this". Regarding the linkages between the industry and the quality assurance body (MQA), the industry stakeholders said they "have no idea of what's going in that area [quality assurance] (Industry[2])". The same sentiment was expressed by Industry[1], who said "up to last year there were no linkages". However, he also revealed "but I think the newly formed national university has given one or two seats in the National University council for the industry representatives".

The importance of providing linkages between industry and higher education institutions (HEIs) and the MQA was emphasised by the majority of the industry stakeholder groups. For instance, Industry[4] emphasised "there should be a say by the

industry, because when they design a program, they [HEIs] are training people for those industries". This argument was supported by Industry[1] who noted "they should get more input regarding the needs of the industries such as tourism ..... which is our need area [from the] the graduates". There was acknowledgement by the stakeholder MQA that the industry was the best judge on the quality of higher education as they employ these graduates. In this regard, MQA pointed out "when the candidates go into an employment sector and if the employment sector readily accepts those candidates, then it can be assumed that their training is good". What looks like a positive development in this regard, the quality assurance guidelines in the Maldives National Qualifications Framework guides the institutions towards workplace training through "a mix of training off the job and training in the workplace with assessment results being combined towards a full award" (Document[1]). It remains to be seen if these new developments can make a difference and foster meaningful linkages between the stakeholders industry, HEIs and the MQA.

4.2.2.3 Summary.

In summary, under the element of minimum quality standards, two themes emerged: the process of setting standards and the scope of standards. Under the process of setting standards, the importance of having guidelines for academic audit, stakeholder involvement and transparency of this process emerged as sub-themes. Involvement of the stakeholders in developing these guidelines and setting standards was proposed by the stakeholders. Similarly, transparency in this process through communication and availability of documents to the public was also highlighted in the data analysis.

As for the scope of standards the emerging sub-themes were: quality of higher education, global rankings and industry linkages. The stakeholders' views on the quality of higher education pointed that there are concerns on issues such as areas of study and relevance of programs as those areas were not up to their stakeholders' expectations. Though the majority of HEI stakeholders supported the global rankings as an indicator of international standard, there was also strong criticism of these ranking. It was described as a 'marketing gimmick' for industrialised countries. For that reason, some HEIs participants proposed regional and local rankings for 3rd world countries as an alternative that would be more meaningful to their local needs and capacities. Linkages between the Industry and HEIs appear to be very minimal in

the current organisational arrangements in the Maldives. This point was emphasised by the Industry stakeholders noting that industry should have a say in the design of academic programs, so that the graduates will be better prepared for industry needs. The standards in the revised Maldives National Qualifications Framework encourage industry linkages. However, it remains to be seen how much of an effect that will have on fostering linkages between the industry and the HEIs.

4.2.3 Service delivery

The third element of the conceptual framework was service delivery. Under this element four themes emerged: (1) accreditation; (2) academic audit; (3) transparency in service delivery; and (4) collaboration.

The terms accreditation and academic audit are used interchangeably in this study because the stakeholders did not distinguish between them. However, the literature (Chapter Two) provided a definition of these two terms which shows a subtle difference, which will be discussed in Chapter Five (Section 5.4.1). It is important to note that the HEIs in the Maldives are in the process of fully appreciating the mechanics of accreditation and academic audit as part of the on-going development in the system of higher education QA. So these terms were relatively new to the stakeholders. The data reflected the understanding of these terms as per their comments during the interviews.

4.2.3.1 Theme: Accreditation.

The HEIs stakeholder group were asked about their views on the current arrangement in the Maldives for accreditation as part of the quality assurance process. The sub-themes that emerged under accreditation were: (1) institutional accreditation; and (2) program accreditation. Table 4.7 presents the key findings derived from the responses of the stakeholders on sub-theme accreditation and underlying issues.

Table 4.7

Sub-themes and issues around the theme accreditation

Sub-themes	Underlying issues	Data sources
Institutional accreditation	The importance of institutional accreditation	HEI[5], HEI[6]
Program accreditation	Course approval	MQA, HEI[3], HEI[7], HEI[8], Document[6]
	Delay in getting approval	HEI[3], HEI[8], Document[6]

*Refer to Appendix F Table F.6 for the actual data.

Institutional accreditation.

All stakeholders recognised that institutional accreditation was an important process and central to HE quality assurance system. As noted in Table 4.7 participants' key responses on institutional accreditation came largely from the HEIs stakeholder group. Data analysis revealed the underlying issues and the importance of institutional accreditation under this sub-theme.

Stakeholder groups which were directly affected, such as the HEIs, had the view that institutional accreditation was an important process which is missing from the current QA system in the Maldives. Consequently, only a third of the HEI stakeholders who were aware of this QA requirement made direct reference to institutional accreditation. This was understandable as in the Maldives the focus is on accrediting programs, not institutions (a further discussion of program accreditation will be presented in the next section). However, HEI[5] noted that "in the Maldives, the programs are approved but institutional accreditation is not being done". As noted earlier, the idea of integrating institutional accreditation that follows registration of the HEI does not exist in the current system practiced in the Maldives. After a review of all available documents from the MQA, it was clear that there was no mechanism in place in the Maldives to accredit institutions. The overall impression from the data analysis was that there was concern regarding the "performance of the accreditation process" and the need to "understand the uniqueness of each institution" (HEI[6]) by the MQA. Therefore, an institution's capacity to effectively deliver an accredited program could, perhaps, be better assured through institutional accreditation. One of the HEI stakeholders suggested that institutional accreditation should be performed before program accreditation. For example, HEI[5] insisted that "they have to accredit the college first" noting that "we can only deliver the program when the college is

accredited, because the college can be accredited only when the system (all the facilities and HR capacity) is in place in the college". HEI[5] pointed out that the main purpose of having this order of institutional accreditation first and then program accreditation to follow was to make sure that the appropriate "system is in place" (HEI[5]). It is only then the programs delivered by the accredited institutions can be assured of the minimum agreed quality.

Program accreditation.

Two underlying issues emerged around the sub-theme program accreditation: (1) course approval mechanism; and (2) delay in getting approval. Table 4.7 illustrates key issues derived from the participants' responses on program accreditation. Two stakeholder groups, the HEIs and the MQA were the main contributors to these issues.

The stakeholder group HEIs, acknowledged that the dominant higher education QA process in the Maldives was program accreditation. This was, as discussed in the previous section, in the absence of institutional accreditation. It is worth noting that in the Maldives, it was called "course approval" (HEI[7]), not program accreditation. According to Document[2], the process of program approval practiced in the Maldives lacks the rigour [and also] no conditions are attached to the approval. Though, the process was called as such, to some extent, it was reminiscent of program accreditation as there was an initial yes/no decision allowing institutions to proceed to offering the program. However, the approval of the program had no time period for its approval—it was an indefinite approval (Maldives Qualifications Authority, 2011). Referring to this aspect, Document[6] pointed out that "some countries have a time limit on accreditation of programs, after which they expect institutions to re-new, their accreditation". Perhaps, that is why it is not yet called programme accreditation in the Maldives. Nevertheless, this process of program approval was described as "a huge bottleneck" (HEI[8]) referring to the slow speed of processing the applications for every program offered by every HEI. HEI[3] also described that the "only complaint which all the institutions might have are the delays". Related to this argument, Document[6] recommended "re-engineering and simplifying the process in approving new programs offered by the private sector". Despite the good intentions, this has not been implemented to date.

One participant from the HEIs stakeholder group (HEI^1) raised a lot of doubt about the quality of MQA program approval process, indicating that it was "not a mark of quality". HEI^1 argued that it "simply means checking that every minimum requirement is complied with". HEI^1 further suggested that there should be some differentiation in quality such as "superior, excellent, elevated or of high rank". HEI^1 argued that all programs submitted to MQA for approval were quality-assured and therefore, there was nothing below the expected quality levels in this case. So how do the public decide which HEI is better? HEI^1, which is the National University, further argued that the task carried out by most QA agencies "to see that all programs meet the minimum standards" was not a mark of quality. He went on further to suggest that "we have to use another method to identify quality programs that are well above those that just meet the minimum requirements". It is worth mentioning that unlike the majority of the HEIs in the Maldives, HEI^1, who represent the Maldives National University (MNU), appears to have a different notion of what determines quality as MNU, because of direct Government support, may be able to do things better than other HEIs and seeks to be given that higher ranking. However, it is important to note that MQA's role, as a regulatory body, is to establish and monitor the minimum quality standards with which all HEIs have to comply, including MNU. Differentiating the HEIs can be a future consideration by MQA, but for now, achieving the minimum standards across all HEI is the central challenge.

4.2.3.2 Theme: Academic audit

Academic audit was defined in section 2.4.3 under the sub-heading 'academic audit'. Similar to accreditation, stakeholder discussions on academic audit occurred in response to a question about their views on the current arrangement in the Maldives academic audit. Two sub-themes emerged from the data analysis that fall under academic audit: (1) institutional audit; and (2) program audit. According to the literature review and what is practiced in many countries, these two types of academic audit are dependent on each other. Therefore, a consolidated approach is required when establishing a holistic QA system. How these two types of academic audit are linked will be elaborated in Chapter Five (Discussions). Table 4.8 presents key findings derived from the responses of the stakeholders on academic audit, sub-theme and underlying issues.

Table 4.8

Sub-themes and issues around the theme academic audit

Sub-themes	Underlying issues	Data sources
Institutional audit	Audit as quality improvement	HEI[2], HEI[5], HEI[6], HEI[9]
	From supervision to audit	MQA, Industry[2], HEI[2]
	Audit process	MoE, HEI[2], HEI[7], HEI[9], Document[6]
Programme audit	supervision	HEI[3], Industry[4], Document[6]

*Refer to Appendix F Table F.7 for the actual data.

Institutional audit

As illustrated in Table 4.8 three issues were identified around the sub-theme institutional audit: (1) audit as quality improvement; (2) from supervision to audit; and (3) the audit process. It is important to note that the stakeholders did not make a clear distinction between the two type of academic audit (institutional and program). In fact, most of the time they referred to it as just 'audit'. The reason for this can be that the Maldives is developing its QA system and aspiring to introduce an institutional audit. Hence, the stakeholders appear to have minimal or no understanding of what encompasses an institutional audit and there is also some overlap with accreditation as noted in the previous section.

Though not yet practiced in the Maldives, institutional audit was perceived by the HEIs stakeholders (HEI[2], HEI[9]) as a quality improvement instrument. There was a desire to shift from the current arrangement "to see more of a change in the quality improvement aspect where MQA carries out external audits and the HEI conducted their own regular internal audits" (HEI[2]). HEI[9] noted that currently there was minimal activity in terms of institutional audits saying "they are doing very little in terms of quality improvement". The level of progress in developing and implementing institutional audits was noted by HEI[6] "with regard to quality audit from the government side, I think, it is still in a very infant stage". As these extracts indicate, apparently, the stakeholder HEIs perceived institutional audit as more of a continuous process of quality improvement as opposed to the current regime (without institutional audit), which was seen more as quality control.

While institutional audit is not practiced in the Maldives, there is a process called supervision that does not fit with any of the standard QA processes adopted in

other countries. MQA recognises this process as "a very time consuming process". MQA indicated that it was considering "bringing to a halt" this process of supervision and it would "be replaced by the quality audits where MQA may be auditing the quality of QA mechanisms installed as a process within the institutions". To support such a shift towards implementing institutional audit, Industry[2] seemed to be arguing for the same: "we need to see more visitations by the accrediting authorities". Though this statement gives the impression that there are some visitations (for audits), the reality is "no concrete work has been done to carry out academic audit or external audit" (HEI[2]). What was quite clear was that there was no participant from the HEI stakeholder group who rejected the idea of moving towards institutional audit. Apparently, the heavy burden of supervision was not only on the MQA staff but also on the staff of HEIs, hence the overwhelming support to change to institutional audit. Compared to this arrangement (refer to Section 4.2.1.2 – sub-theme program audit), institutional audit will be more manageable in terms of workload.

The stakeholder MoE and a third of the HEIs (HEI[2], HEI[7], HEI[9]) were interested in how the institutional audit process should be carried out. Issues that were raised with regard to institutional audit process were audit panel, secretarial support for audit panel, training institutions for conducting internal audit and providing audit reports. For instance, MoE emphasised "it is important to ensure that the auditors/ panel members have the right qualifications with respect to the field of study being audited. The appropriate training for auditors is essential". This suggestion, focusing on the 'field of study being audited' again emphasises the point noted in the beginning of this section (service delivery) that many of the terms used in QA are new to the stakeholders in the Maldives. MoE also noted that "selection of panel chair requires careful considerations too". Adding to the selection criteria for panel membership, HEI[9] suggested that "local experts [opposed to overseas experts] to [be] include[d] in[sic] the panel". HEI[2] proposed that MQA should "train the institutions to carry out internal audits [self-assessment] of themselves". The current approach for institutional audit is summed up as a series of steps, the first being 'for the institution to complete a self-assessment exercise (to a standard format), which is then submitted to the quality agency; this is followed up by a team of reviewers who visit an institution and discuss the self-assessment" (Document[6]). On whether the

audit report should be made public or not, it was suggested that "it should be made public, because the consumers have the right to know" (HEI[7]) and it increases transparency. Adopting the these new arrangements, MoE noted the importance of secretarial support by saying "audit process certainly requires efficient secretarial support in terms of organising meetings, hiring/ booking meetings rooms, preparing documents, etc". The issue around secretarial support was raised by the stakeholder MoE may suggest the government's commitment to the development of the national quality assurance agency. At the same time it is important to point out that secretarial support is an operational issue and not significant for developing a QA system.

Program audit

Data analysis revealed the underlying difficulty with supervision in the Maldives around the sub-theme, program audit. In the absence of a proper academic audit process (neither institutional nor program), what was practiced in the Maldives was probably not a quality audit but a compliance audit, which is called supervision in the Maldives. This process is described as "very detailed checks on the study records of each batch of students seeking to graduate from private sector colleges before it authorises their entitlement to an award" (Document[6]).

The data analysis revealed that there was no explicit mention of program audit by the stakeholders. This could be due to a lack of understanding by the stakeholders that academic audit and program audit did not have any significant difference. Therefore, as discussed in the previous section, their understanding of academic audit was that of institutional audit which was currently not happening within the Maldives QA system. In the Maldives, program audit is not a term people use and it may have been confused with the unique Maldivian practice of supervision. Referring to this process of supervision, Document[6] gave an example of how program audit can occur "however, governments may also request reviews of specific academic programme where they have concerns". The concerns mentioned often refer to scenarios such as public complaints about a program delivered at a HEI. This insight was informative especially in the absence of a clear understanding by the participants regarding program audit. As suggested in the institutional audit section, supervision can be merged into audit procedures. However, the HEIs stakeholder noted that the current process of supervision in the Maldives has features of program audit. For instance, HEI[3] stated "[when] audit is concerned any way, definitely like supervision has been

happening after the courses where all the input is checked by MQA". This was described by Document[6] as "highly labour-intensive and imposes a heavy burden on the small staff available to the MQA, and delays the process of quality assurance". The constant or regular audit (needs to identify how often) was recommended also by the Industry stakeholder. For example, Industry[4] stated "the role of MQA should not be only approving programs, but they have to check whether HEIs are maintaining quality. To do that, they should always audit the progress". Overall, these extracts indicate that program audit itself is not carried out on a regular basis on each academic program taught in the country. Hence, it points out that programs can be audited as a sub-set of institutional audit processes.

4.2.3.3 Theme: Transparency in service delivery.

Transparency was also included under the previous two QA elements. Data analysis showed that transparency was also considered a significant issue and consequently adopted as a theme under transparency of services. Table 4.9 presents key findings derived from the responses of the stakeholders on the theme transparency in service delivery. There were no sub-themes so the underlying issues were directly linked to the themes.

Table 4.9

Issues around the theme transparency of services

Theme	Underlying issues	Data sources
Transparency of the services	HEIs meeting QA standards	HEI[2], HEI[3], HEI[4], HEI[6], HEI[7], HEI[8]
	Transparency of QA activities at HEIs	HEI[5], HEI[6], HEI[8], Industry[3]

*Refer to Appendix F Table F.8 for the actual data.

Two underlying issues were identified around the theme of transparency in service delivery: (1) HEIs meeting QA standards; and (2) transparency of QA activities at HEIs. The HEI stakeholder group generally believe they are doing whatever they can to meet the QA standards imposed by the MQA. For example, HEI[6] insisted that "since the [qualifications] framework was introduced in 2009, the institution has been preparing itself to implement all the changes in the framework". Likewise, HEI[4] emphasised "we look at MQA standards and based on MQA standards we have our strategic plan". As a testament to meeting the local QA

requirements tied up with the approved academic programs, HEI[7] clarified we "have a set of processes through which we ensure that various modules are delivered as per the prescribed outline, the content covered is ensured, the assessment is as per the course documents, that standards are maintained in assessment process". While this was meeting the local QA requirements, some HEIs ascertained their effort to meet foreign QA requirements as well. For instance, HEI[3] said that they "tie up with international partners where we adhere to their guidelines; their quality assurance policies". Similarly, HEI[6] revealed "we have every mechanism in place plus external affiliations and external authorities and internal bodies to make sure everything runs smoothly". He also emphasised that "because we are running British programs, we get visits from British universities. They want to see how we do things". The notion of adhering to foreign QA benchmarks may sound attractive. However, if that is at the cost of neglecting local standards and requirements, there can be some adverse consequences to the students when it comes to local recognition of these qualifications. Also, while these HEIs claim having the above QA procedures, not revealing these arrangements to the local QA agency may result in a transparency issue that might lead to mistrust among the stakeholders.

There was acknowledgement of a need for transparency in service delivery at HEIs. It was noted that "ideally the more transparent an organisation is, more effective and more accepted by public also" (HEI[8]). The industry stakeholders also emphasised the need for greater transparency regarding which institution is providing what types of programmes. Industry[3] stated that "unless you are transparent, unless you are honest with what you do, and follow the due process, you know, you wouldn't be able to have [a good quality education system]". It appears that some HEIs believe that in terms of the transparency of their services, they are doing well. For instance, HEI[6] explained that "with the limited resources we have, we are doing well. Recently [two Australian experts involved in a local QA training project] visited and we showed them our quality assurance mechanisms and everything we have in place and they were very impressed". However, having everything on paper may not translate into real action. Indeed HEI[8] revealed "we have an internal quality assurance cell. To be honest, it's not functioning because I am finding it hard to keep staff here". These extracts show that the challenge for the QA agency is how can

they monitor that and ensure the services delivered are meeting the minimum quality targets.

4.2.3.4 Theme: Collaboration in Service delivery.

The theme, collaboration, emerged from the data analysis when the stakeholders were asked about the current arrangement in place for quality assurance of service delivery in higher education and the role MQA can play in establishing and maintaining internal quality assurance mechanisms at HEIs. Also, MoE was asked about the underlying assumptions and principles for the Maldives HE QA system. Table 4.10 presents a summary of responses of the stakeholders on collaboration, and underlying issues. Also, under this theme, no sub-theme emerged from the data analysis.

Table 4.10

Issues around the theme collaboration

Theme	Underlying issues	Data sources
Collaboration	Relationship between the QA agency and HEIs	HEI[4], HEI[6], HEI[7], HEI[8], HEI[9], MQA
	Collaboration between HEIs	HEI[3], HEI[6], HEI[8]
	Collaborate across borders	MoE, Document[6], HEI[6]

*Refer to Appendix F Table F.9 for the actual data.

Data analysis showed two issues under the theme collaboration in service delivery: (1) relationship between the QA agency and HEIs; and (2) collaboration across borders. The majority of the HEIs stakeholder group (HEI[4], HEI[6], HEI[7], HEI[8], HEI[9]) and MQA indicated a need for a collaborative arrangements which can strengthen mutual trust. Most of these HEIs participants focused on the collaboration between the MQA and the HEIs; rather than among themselves, and this is a gap in the system. For example, HEI[7] noted "the key is collaboration rather than confrontations". Similarly, HEI[6] pointed out "it is a more collaborative manner I think to get things done". The same message was echoed by HEI[9] "so, these things must be communicated to their stakeholders in advance before it is announced; more linkages with institutions". If HEI are non-compliant on some of the minimum standards requirements then there should be a mechanism for discussing that with the respective HEI. While, as noted above, some HEIs participants were more concerned about the collaboration between the QA agency and the HEIs, some participants

(HEI[3], HEI[5], HEI[6]) also acknowledged the importance of collaboration among themselves. For instance, HEI[3] emphasised that "the association is [helpful], not only for voicing concerns [to the government], but [it is also helpful] within the institutions". This is an indication that collaboration between the HEIs has also started to happen. It appears that while there is support for collaboration given that many of the HEIs offer similar programs, there are no mechanisms to facilitate such collaboration between the HEIs.

MoE noted the importance of collaboration across borders in reference to twinning and transnational programs, saying that that "commitment to collaborate across borders" was noted as "useful for the Maldives and other small states too". The main benefit from cross border collaboration identified by MoE was to share and learn from each other "there is a lot that could be shared among states". It also allows for international benchmarking for quality.

4.2.3.5 Summary .

Data analysis around the element service delivery revealed four themes: accreditation, academic audit, transparency in service delivery and collaboration. Both the accreditation and academic audit have two types: institutional and program. Data analysis revealed that the system lacks most of the crucial QA processes such as institutional accreditation, and both institutional and program audit. The only process currently used is program accreditation but is called program approval in the Maldives. However, this approval is not granted for a certain period of time as is done in many countries to ensure periodic review is made to monitor that the minimum quality is maintained. This feature of accreditation is explained in the literature review. Apart from these main services, transparency of the services and collaboration with the stakeholders both local and cross-border were noted as important to overall efficiency of the service delivery.

4.3 SYNTHESIS OF THE FINDINGS AS A QA SYSTEM

The above discussions presented the key findings extracted from the data analysis for each of the three elements within a higher education quality assurance system identified in this study. Figure 4.1 illustrates how the themes and sub-themes emerged around the three elements and the relationship between the elements, themes and sub-themes. It illustrates systems theory characteristics as identified in

the findings. It emphasises the fundamental ideas of systems thinking where emergence of new concepts and processes are equally complex with levels of interrelations between them. As discussed in Section 2.7.1, this relationship between the components of a system has a particular relevance to quality assurance in higher education.

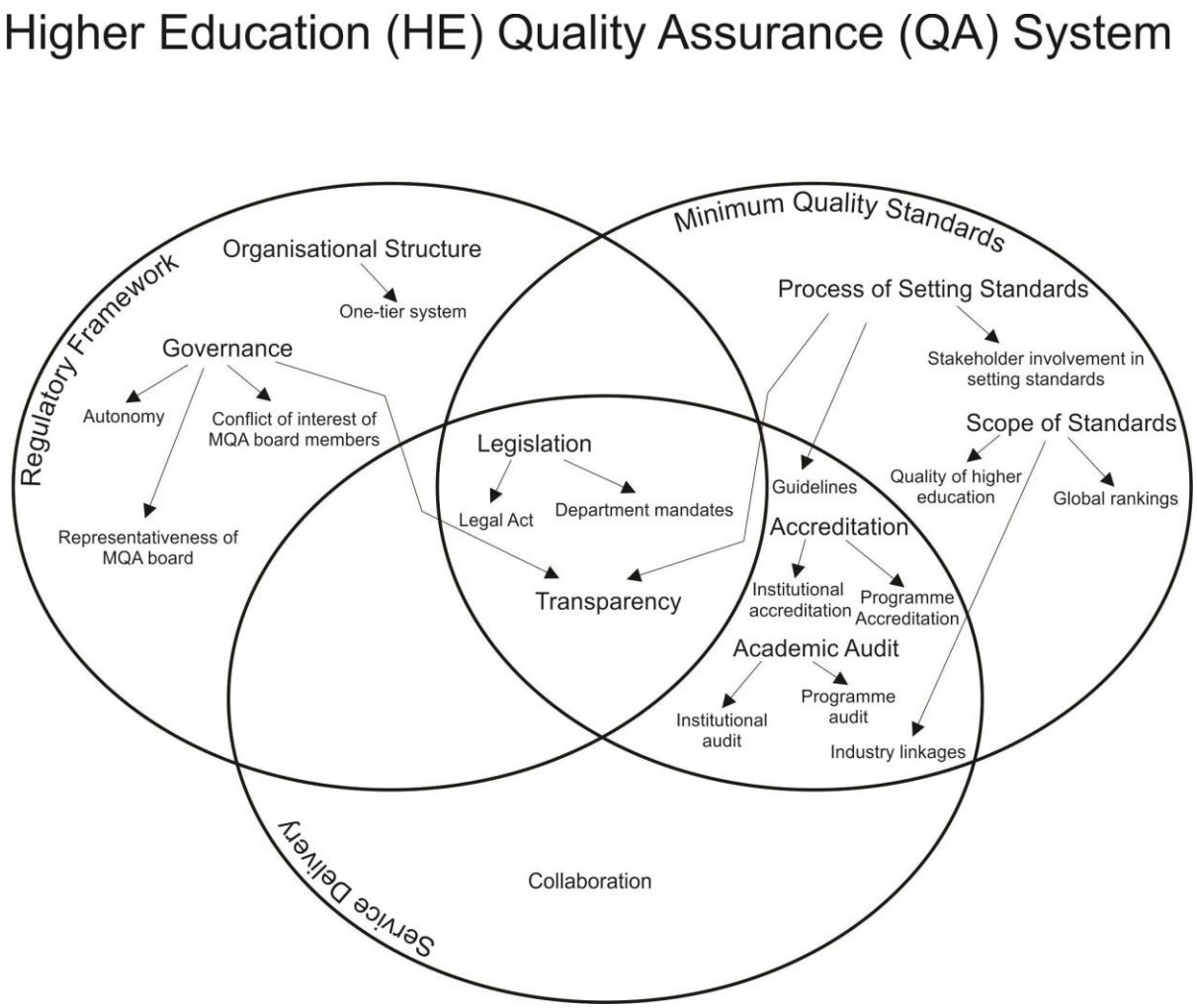

Figure 4.1. The synthesis of findings as a QA system

Figure 4.1 illustrates the elements within a QA system as well as attributes and internal relationships between its elements and attributes within the system that emerged through the themes and sub-themes in the findings. The terms attribute and sub-attribute under each element in the conceptual framework (Section 2.7.2) are used to guide the themes and sub-themes emerged under each element from data analysis. In the light of systems theory, the findings have three elements and attributes (themes and sub-themes) under each element. Three elements identified in the conceptual framework were: (1) Legislative framework, (2) Standards, and (3)

Service delivery. However, after the data collection and the data analysis, minimal amendments were required to adjust the conceptualisation and wordings of these elements. These three elements, as well as the findings under each element, complement each other, emphasising the systemic nature of a higher education quality assurance system. While all attributes in all three elements are interconnected to each other, some of these attributes are more connected to other elements.

For the first element, three main themes were identified: (1) Legislation, (2) Governance, and (3) Organisational structure. Within the element of the regulatory framework, the interdependence among the attributes appeared to be crucial for the overall effectiveness of this QA element. For example, the absence of legislation to regulate QA in the Maldives affects the other attributes under this element such as governance, and organisational structure. The fact that the stakeholders were not clear about the sub-attributes under governance reflects the absence of legislation. Ideally, such legislation can outline the roles and the responsibilities of various stakeholders and attributes of the QA system. The desired organisational structure expressed by the stakeholders was a one-tier system and it appears that, in principle, this is the intention. However, without legislation, there is no guarantee such a system will eventuate. The system would have been protected from external influence if there was legislation regulating the QA system. Furthermore, this element also has direct implications for 'minimum quality standards' and 'service delivery' as it provides the legal framework under which these other elements may be developed and managed.

Two themes emerged under the element Minimum Quality Standards: (1) the process of setting standards; and (2) the scope of standards. From a systems theory perspective, these two themes can be regarded as attributes within this element. As is the case with any system, communication and regular consultation are important to ensure all parties within the system are fully conversant with the QA regulations. This was confirmed in the data analysis which showed a number of sub-attributes and underlying issues under each of these two attributes such as access to guidelines, stakeholder involvement and transparency of the process of setting standards. Transparency in a QA system has to be driven by broader principles such as global rankings and industry linkages. Even within this element, the attributes and sub-attributes support each other. For instance, the process of setting standards and the

sub-attributes such as availability of required guidelines and standards that set the minimum requirements, highlight the importance of stakeholders' involvement in setting standards. For this arrangement to materialise, a legislative framework is required. Transparency of the process of setting standards was directly affecting attributes under the scope of standards. This link was also apparent when the concept of global rankings was discussed by the stakeholders as the underlying issues raised were a matter related to the lack of clear guidelines for higher education QA in the Maldives. Industry, as the employers of the graduates and their linkages, was the other attribute under the scope of standards. The lack of industry stakeholder involvement was a major issue affecting overall standards. With a systems framework, industry is the end user of the products from HEIs. Hence, their involvement, particularly their feedback regarding the competency of the graduates, can give a rough idea about quality. So, these links and the interdependence of the attributes under this element show the importance of adopting a systems approach in order to have a well-rounded QA system for higher education.

The third element investigated in this study was service delivery. The themes that emerged from the data analysis around this element were: (1) accreditation, (2) academic audit, (3) transparency of the services, and (4) collaboration. There seems to be a lack of focus on holistic QA processes that support each other. Data analysis showed that currently in the Maldives, none of the mainstream QA processes (accreditation and academic audit) are carried out in a systematic manner. Also the processes that are implemented are not part of a system, whereby different processes and functions rely on each other as part of a series of events. For instance, the missing processes include institutional accreditation and both forms of academic audit (institutional and program). The only process used is program accreditation (approval in Maldives), but that also occurs without a very important feature, which is time-based accreditation. A process called supervision practiced in the Maldives is not a quality audit, but a compliance audit, which was described by the stakeholders as a very labour-intensive process. In addition to accreditation and academic audit, transparency in service delivery was noted as an important attribute of the element of service delivery. However, this was linked to both the QA agency and HEIs.

As pointed out, while the attributes under each element complement each other, the interdependence between the three elements is also apparent. The three

elements (regulatory framework, minimum quality standards and service delivery) each deal with a different aspect of quality assurance in higher education and together make a QA system. As shown in the data analysis, the first element (regulatory framework) deals with the regulatory and legislative aspects of a QA system. The second element (minimum quality standards) sets the minimum quality standards required for the system. The third element (service delivery) functions as a by-product of both the first element and the second element. So, the interdependence between these three elements is hard to ignore. As illustrated in Figure 4.1, legislation, and transparency influence the three elements for the system to work. Accreditation and academic audit are shaped by how the minimum quality standards are developed. Attributes of minimum quality standards such as guidelines and industry linkages are crucial for service delivery to function well. HEIs are expected to respond to the minimum standards collectively agreed to and formally implemented by the QA agency.

It is almost inconceivable how a proper QA system can be established without these three elements to complement and support each other. As evident in the findings, currently in the Maldives, there is no proper regulatory framework in place. This judgement is based on the fact that there is no legal Act to regulate the QA system. The lack of regulatory framework has a direct effect on how the quality standards are developed and the capacity to implement the minimum standards. That in turn affects the QA functions and processes that are offered in the delivery of QA services. Furthermore, the findings showed that in the Maldives, QA processes such as accreditation and academic audit are currently not being considered. The main reason for this trend that emerged from the data analysis was lack of minimum standards and guidelines required for this to happen. While most of these standards are not developed, it is difficult to implement crucial QA processes.

Figure 4.1 highlights the interconnections between the three elements, namely (1) regulatory framework, (2) minimum quality standards, and (3) service delivery. Chapter Five will discuss the relationship between the elements, related attributes (i.e. themes, sub-themes and underlying issues) with connections to the broader literature in QA in higher education.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents a detailed discussion of the findings with reference to the current literature in the field. This is guided by the conceptual framework and the themes emerging from the findings. The chapter is organised into three main sections around the three elements for quality assurance (QA) in higher education (HE). Section 5.2 discusses findings associated with the regulatory framework. Section 5.3 presents discussion on the minimum quality standards, and Section 5.4 focuses on service delivery.

5.2 REGULATORY FRAMEWORK

QA in HE necessitates a regulatory framework to support and enforce agreed standards and delivery of HE services. As discussed in Chapter Two, the importance of strengthening regulatory aspects of higher education quality assurance systems, was emphasised by the Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education (Bradley et al., 2008).

The key findings from the empirical work in this study concurred with much of the international literature in the field and therefore provided insight for developing a QA model for Small States. The main issues categorised under the element of regulatory framework were legislation, governance and the organisational structure. From a systems perspective, these themes are considered key attributes under the element regulatory framework.

5.2.1 Legislation and Regulatory Mechanisms.

Table 4.2 in Chapter Four presented a categorisation of the stakeholders' responses from interviews and documents regarding regulatory mechanisms for a higher education QA. The findings under this attribute suggested that the current QA system in the Maldives was set up by a Presidential decree and regulated by the mandate of the Maldives Qualifications Authority (MQA). The importance of separating political interference from implementing legislation was emphasised by the HE QA stakeholders in the Maldives, acknowledging that the current QA

arrangement was not effective or efficient (see Section 4.2.1.1). One of the main issues raised by the participants was that without legislation, there is risk of external influence over the QA body. The stakeholders noted it was a significant challenge for the system to function well without interference. Therefore, the majority of the stakeholders expressed an urgent need for legislation to govern the QA of higher education.

The role legislation plays in regulating HE QA was examined in light of a literature review earlier in this study (Section 2.4.1.1) The importance of legislation was also evident in the strong consensus among the stakeholders on having a clear legislative arrangement (Section 4.2.1.1) which aligned with world-wide best practices (Bradley et al., 2008; Keevy et al., 2008; Manyaga, 2008). Therefore, it is unrealistic not to pursue the legislative approach for establishing and strengthening HE QA in the Maldives and other Small States. An international study of the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education in Small Studies (Stella, 2010) noted some progress being made by Small States like the Maldives when legislation for quality assurance was developed and appropriate legislation was in place to support the QA agency/ unit becoming operational (Stella, 2010). However, the real problem in the Maldives was that the quality assurance agency was set up in 2001 without any legislative support (Section 4.2.1.1). Furthermore, even with the recent re-structuring of the quality assurance agency from the Maldives Accreditation Board to the Maldives Qualifications Authority in 2010, there was still no legal arrangement accompanying that change of structure.

In the absence of legislation to regulate HE QA, many stakeholders focused on what was included in the current MQA mandate, which was the only official document that regulates QA in the Maldives (Section 4.2.1.1 – *department mandates*). One of the issues raised was the lack of clear demarcation of functions. One stakeholder complained that MQA was wearing "too many hats" by being "a regulatory body; a consultative body; and a professional development body". This was very different and lacked focus compared to some other HE QA systems in Australia and Malaysia (see Section 2.4.1.1). Indeed, Industry Stakeholders implied that a strong focus on program qualification under the current regulatory mechanism, through the MQA mandate presented a narrower function than the usual international models of accreditation (quality assurance). International literature (ENQA, 2006)

shows HE QA systems are usually regulated through legislation covering a wider range of roles and functions. Therefore, a comparison of the contents of legislation in some other countries and what is included in the current MQA mandate showed gaps in the current QA regulatory mechanisms in the Maldives for higher education.

In Figure 5.1, the grey area includes the functions that are already in the MQA mandate (Document[3]). The other section of Figure 5.1 presents important QA functions and roles that were not yet included in the MQA mandate, but are consistent with legislation in Australia and Malaysia (refer to Section 2.4.1.1). It provides a platform to anticipate core areas for the QA system for the Maldives and other similar Small States by considering the current QA needs and worldwide trends as seen in Australia and Malaysia (Office of Legislative Drafting and Publishing, 2011; Parliament of Malaysia, 2007). By identifying these core areas and key roles, functions, and responsibilities, inclusions and exclusions, future legislation for HE QA can be envisioned. Even though MQA mandate has functions (in the grey section) listed without legislation, as noted by the majority of the stakeholders, it was difficult to enforce, lacked clarity and details, and therefore perhaps not comparable to international practices. Nonetheless, as shown in Figure 5.1, the MQA mandate focused on national qualifications framework (NQF) and qualifications, and did not provide any guidelines for the organisational structure, financial provisions, enforceability, appeal processes, investigative powers, areas that are crucial for a fully-fledged HE QA system. In addition, other important areas neglected in the MQA mandate included registration, accreditation, HE standards, structure for boards, councils and panels in the QA agency, and recognition of prior learning. Therefore, strengthening these gaps in future QA legislation for the Maldives and other Small States appears to be vital. It is also a globally recognised norm that such legislation should have a full description of the mandate and tasks of the national QA agency for higher education (ENQA, 2006).

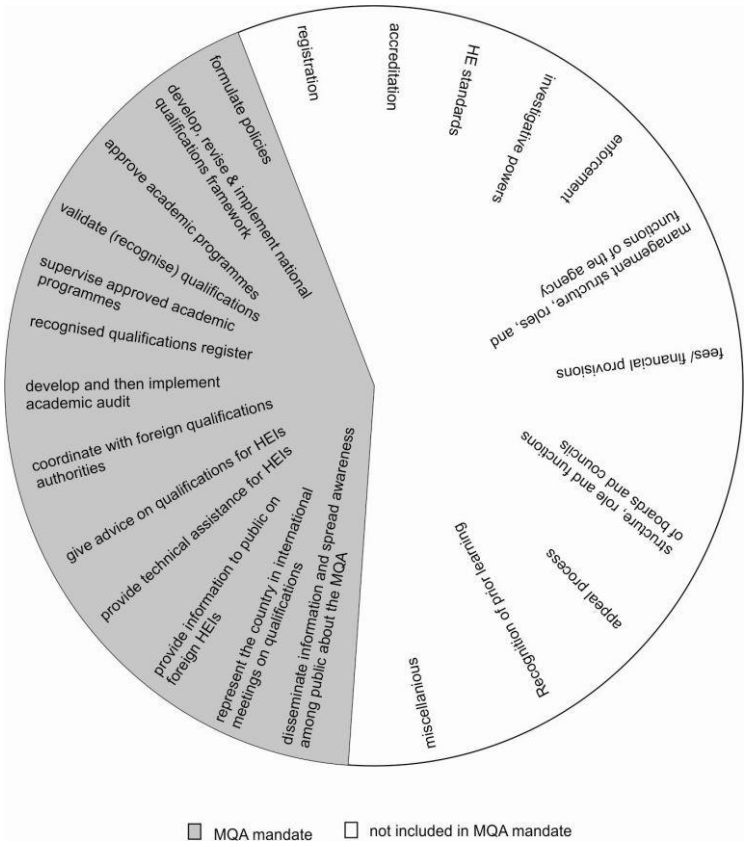

Figure 5.1. The gap in the MQA mandate, compared to Australia and Malaysia

The data analysis indicated that in spite of all stakeholders agreeing on the importance of legislation, there was little discussion as to what should be included in such legislation and the necessary processes for the introduction of legislation. Given the limited understanding of international QA practices, some of the participants implied that not having legislation was not an issue and a few others claimed that even without legislation, higher education institutions (HEIs) were complying with government policies. Complying with bad polices may be good governance but not a good QA system. This was an indication that senior management themselves were not clear on how important legislation was to regulate HE QA. The findings suggested a need for stakeholder discussions on the contents of QA legislation. Figure 5.2 illustrates the core areas to be included in legislation for a HE QA agency for a Small State context such as the Maldives. These include gaps identified in the findings and in the World Bank report on higher education in the Maldives (The World Bank, 2012). The analysis of the current MQA mandate which was part of the document analysis, and legislation in Australia and Malaysia, were considered in the synthesis presented in figure 5.2 (Office of Legislative Drafting and Publishing, 2011; Parliament of Malaysia, 2007); see also Section 2.4.1.1).

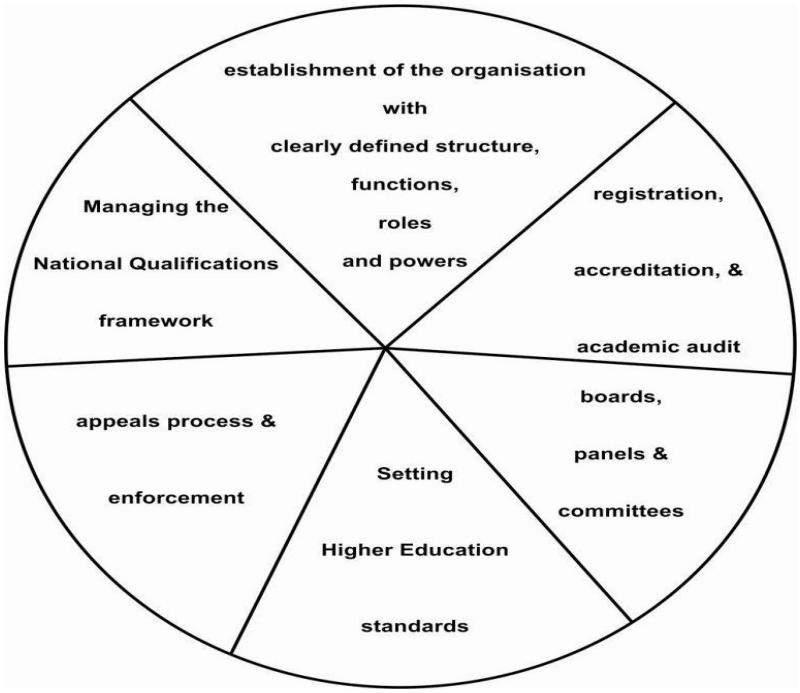

Figure 5.2. Core areas of a QA in HE legislation

Figures 5.2 and 5.1 are linked as all the functions illustrated in Figure 5.1 fall under one of the six core areas in Figure 5.2. Out of 13 functions in the grey sector of Figure 5.1, six functions represent management of national qualifications framework. QA functions (registration, accreditation, academic audit) are included. Registration and accreditation is in the white sector of Figure 5.1, and academic audit is in the grey sector. This may indicate that academic audit is already happening in the Maldives context. However, as discussed in Section 5.4,1, academic audit has not yet been introduced in the country. Also, it is important to note that approval of academic programs is a term used in the Maldives, which is almost the same as accreditation. However, there are slight differences, most notably, absence of a cyclical process which means the approval is given indefinitely in the Maldives. In Section 5.4.1, a unique function in the Maldives context, noted in the grey shaded part of Figure 5.1 is supervision of academic programs. This is unique to the Maldives, because it is not known to be practised elsewhere in the world. This activity has been identified in the findings as creating a bottleneck in the QA system (Section 4.2.3.1 – *Program accreditation*). This description implies that the supervision process is hindering development and implementation of other crucial QA processes such as accreditation and academic audit, because a lot of resources and time are consumed for supervision. Another core area in Figure 5.2 is

establishment of the organisation, represented in the white sector as management structure, roles and functions of the agency as well as fees and financial provisions. The closest function in the grey area (Figure 5.1) to establishment of organisation is policy formulation—which is very limited and this misses some of the other core functions. The fourth core area in Figure 5.2 is boards, panels and committees. This core area is also in the white sector, meaning there is no systemic mechanism in the Maldives HE QA system to establish such boards, panels and committees. Document analysis (Document[4]) revealed there was only one document in this regard, which was the *terms of reference for the MQA board*. However, this does not provide a mechanism or procedures to be followed in establishing such boards, panels and committees. The next core area is setting standards, which is included in the white sector. Possibly related to this core area is recognition of prior learning which may not be as crucial as other functions as it is used only in some countries as a separate function and often included within the NQF. The sixth function, miscellaneous in Figure 5.2, gives the QA agency flexibility to encompass additional functions not included in the other five core areas. It also encompasses HE standards as well as functions and roles defined for the establishment of the QA agency. In addition, it also contains structure for boards and councils as well as appeal processes. All these core areas of legislation regulate all processes and procedures of the whole QA system. Therefore, it shows how legislation is linked to the other two elements (minimum quality standards and service delivery) in the QA system. It is the legislation which provides clarity of roles and functions, and articulation between all the three elements: regulatory framework, minimum quality standards and service delivery.

The stakeholders did not discuss many of the core areas in QA legislation or details of any underlying functions in the core areas noted in figure 5.2. Nonetheless, the stakeholders often shared views that indicated they were not happy with some of the decisions made by the QA agency but had no recourse or appeal process (Section 4.2.1.2). Having legislation allows people to appeal the decision of the QA authority through the legal system (Section 2.4.1.3). This cannot be done in the current Maldives system. Currently, appeals are reviewed by the same body that make the initial decisions which is why the majority of the stakeholders preferred a QA system regulated by legislation independent of bureaucracy.

It was also interesting to note the lack of clear understanding by the stakeholders, regarding licensing and registration of HEIs, including who is involved and how it works. The findings from the document analysis indicated registration and licensing process should be strengthened. Document[6] indicated how licensing and registration are linked to accreditation and QA but this has not been implemented to date. Also, Figure 5.1, which is based on both the findings and the current literature (Section 2.4.3.2 - *Registration*) such as McBurnie and Ziguras (2001) who indicated registration as one of the HE QA processes. The process of registration in the Maldives was carried out by the department of higher education (Department of Higher Education [Maldives], 2012); however, the QA monitoring was done by the MQA. Even though the stakeholders did not discuss whether registration should be separated from the actual quality assurance body or not, in light of scholarly literature (Office of Legislative Drafting and Publishing, 2011; Parliament of Malaysia, 2007), it should be an issue addressed by legislation.

5.2.2 Governance.

This section discusses management and governance issues necessary to support the implementation of a QA system. A summary of the key findings is noted in Table 4.3 – Section 4.2.1.2 as attributes under the element regulatory framework. The attributes indentified in the findings were independent/ autonomous and strong national QA agencies, representativeness of the QA agency's board and conflict of interest.

5.2.2.1 Independent and single strong national QA agency.

Autonomy or independence of a HE QA agency is vital for the effectiveness of the system. Considering the capacity constraints of Small States, it is prudent to consider a single strong national agency that fits a one-tier system. Findings from the document analysis revealed that (Document[6]) the Maldives QA agency MQA and the Ministry of Education (MoE) are involved in monitoring the quality of HEIs. The MoE carried out the registration and the MQA does everything else. This does not comply with the expectations of a single QA system. Also, according to the document analysis, MQA is supposed to be an independent QA agency. However, the tone of stakeholders' discussion of independence indicated that a majority did not view MQA as an independent agency. Nonetheless, the stakeholders were strongly in favour of giving independence to the HE QA agency (Section 4.2.1.2 – *Autonomy*).

The idea of making the HE QA agency an independent body is in fact well supported in today's QA debates (Section 2.4.1.4) as argued by Ala-Vähälä and Saarinen (2010)

The stakeholders did not link autonomy and independence with the capacity of a single strong one-tier system for monitoring the different aspects with a QA system. When probed further, some participants indicated their understanding that an independent body will be stronger and fair, devoid of any external influences. Also, a single strong QA agency will facilitate independence and a clear boundary around their function and thereby increase accountability. This was in line with an European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) report on Portuguese QA systems (ENQA, 2006), which also implied that one of the defining features of a strong QA agency is to be independent of outside influence of any single entity such as the government, HEIs and other interested groups by having an independent board to regulate and govern the agency. However, this may not be entirely possible for Small States like the Maldives. As shown in Figure 5.3, the national QA agency in the Maldives was influenced by the government and other stakeholders. Also, the document analysis revealed that MQA board membership composition has been changed to include representatives of the stakeholders as well as the QA agency—widening the participation. This may be seen as influence. Though these influences are there, involvement of various stakeholders allows mitigation against single entity influence. Even though no criticism was expressed by the stakeholders on the way the HE QA system was currently designed in terms of functioning as a single QA system, there was overwhelming agreement on the suitability of a one-tier system for the country as a Small State. This view accords with King's (2007) assertion that a one-tier system promotes greater consistency and efficiency.

Much of the concern expressed by the stakeholders regarding independence of the MQA was linked to external influence which was cited by the majority of the participants as a major hurdle for the MQA to gain full independence. Unfortunately in Small States where everyone knows everyone else, avoiding influence is difficult but essential. Currently, as noted in the findings chapter, there seems to be influence exerted by various external parties on the QA agency (Section 4.2.1.2 – *Autonomy*). Figure 5.3 provides a visual representation of the participants' perception of different

influences over the QA agency. They have expressed concern that these influences appeared to be affecting the HE QA agency's independence in the Maldives.

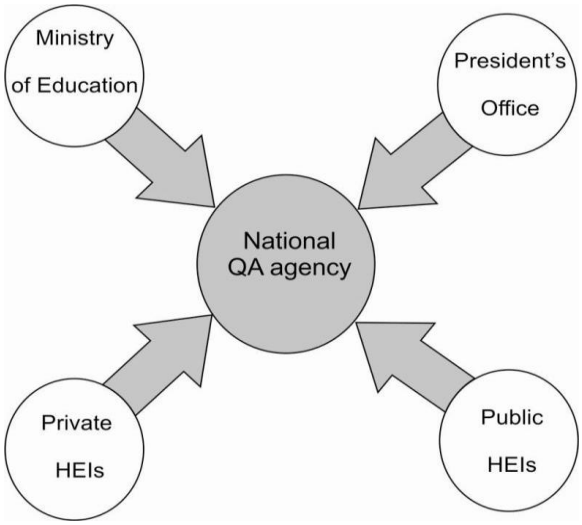

Figure 5.3. Influence over the QA agency in the Maldives

The interviews and document analysis point out to various influences exerted over the MQA. For example, document analysis indicated that there was inevitable influence from the Ministry of Education (MoE), because as per MQA mandate (Document[3]), structurally it was under the Ministry and reported to the Minister of Education. Document analysis also indicated that there was direct influence by the President's Office, largely, because the MQA was created by a Presidential decree (without legislation) (see Sections 4.2.1.1 – *Legal Act* and 5.2.1). Therefore, the President's Office had the ultimate authority over the decisions made by the QA agency. This was also noted by some stakeholders who cited incidents of direct interference from the President's Office and politicising of the work of the QA agency. There was also influence from the bigger HEIs. For instance, the National University of Maldives expected special considerations from the MQA. The influence of the private HEIs on the MQA board was noted by the public HEIs as well as some private HEIs. It is important to note that the nature of these influences indicates that their influence arises because the current system makes them part of the HE QA system. While various stakeholders have representation on the Board, stakeholders are bound to influence. The danger of influence is apparent if the involved party seeks personal benefits and/ or unreasonable interference as noted by the stakeholders. Otherwise, these influences may not cause harm to the system.

Despite citing influences that affect the MQA's independence, no stakeholder suggested solutions as to how to resolve this challenge and minimise external influence. However, one of the few studies available on regulating HE QA systems (ENQA, 2006) suggest that the best way to regulate and minimise influences is through legislation. That is why the importance of legislation has to be emphasised throughout this study.

While having independence for the HE QA agency was seen as admirable by many stakeholders, the findings also suggested that achieving full independence was not realistic for a Small State like the Maldives (Section 4.2.1.2 – *Autonomy*). Figure 5.4 illustrates the current nature of independence that may be valuable for Small States like the Maldives.

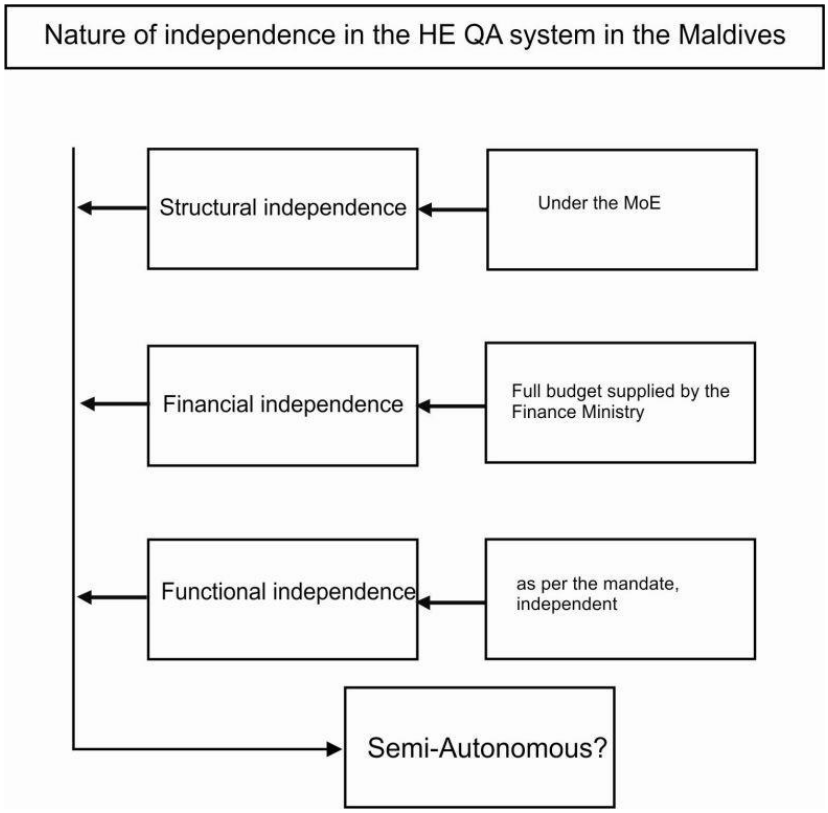

Figure 5.4. The nature of independence in the HE QA system in the Maldives

Figure 5.4 shows three types of independence noted in the finding. The participants made references to structural, financial and functional independence. The findings suggested that the MQA has gained minimal independence in all three areas (Section 4.2.1.2 – *Autonomy*). Available document analysis (Document[3]) as well as the literature review indicated that even now, MQA is physically situated within the Ministry of Education, which means it does not have structural independence.

Limited resources in Small States means sharing of infrastructure space, which is not uncommon. While the MQA's budget was provided by MoE, the MQA participant stated that budget allocations were satisfactory. However, the use of these monies has to be approved by MoE. The increasing demand for higher education and the emergence of new public and private sector providers warranted the government to consider some form of quality assurance mechanisms and therefore MoE took the lead. As noted by Law (2010), it was understandable that the government (MoE) will always have some leverage over how the system functions. Indeed, in many countries it may not be necessary to be totally detached from the Ministry as proposed by a European study (ENQA, 2006).

Not having full structural and financial independence does not prevent independent decision making. As noted earlier, the document analysis revealed that the MQA was an independent agency – at least on paper (Section 4.2.1.2 – *Autonomy*). For instance, the MQA mandate stated it was "an independent regulatory authority that is connected to the Ministry of Education". However, it appears from the participants' responses that if MQA has to channel its decision-making through MoE, as per the current set-up, this can undermine functional independence.

A critical finding was the degree of independence of a HE QA system (Section 4.2.1.2 – *Autonomy*). The majority of the stakeholders wanted full independence for the MQA ensured through legislation. Despite some differences in the view on the degree of independence, no one disagreed with the importance of having functional independence of the QA. These findings concur with Herman's (1998a) observation that the degree of independence is a major issue for government QA agencies and "will lead to greater trust and confidence and enhance professional judgements" (p. 350).

As discussed above, being independent and being a strong QA agency may not be the same thing, but the findings and literature showed that they are linked to some extent. Also the notion of a one-tier system within the concept of one strong QA agency means all the QA functions are integrated and not fragmented. For instance, empirical data and documents (Document[3]) both refer to registration of HEIs as a separate function from the QA agency in the Maldives (see also Section 5.2.1). However, international practice shows registration has to be an integral part of the QA agency. For example, as discussed in Chapter Two, a HEI cannot operate in

Australia without registration with the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA) (Section 2.4.3.2 – *Registration*). Also, because accrediting at least one academic program is a condition for registration, registration is very much a part of overall quality assurance (Office of Legislative Drafting and Publishing, 2011). Therefore, international literature (Shah, Lewis, & Fitzgerald, 2011; also refer to Figure 5.1) shows that registration of HEIs has to be a function of the national HE QA agency. In the case of the Maldives, if registration is a function of another government office, the quality assurance assessments during the process of registration will probably be lacking.

5.2.2.2 Representativeness of the QA agency's board.

As noted earlier, external influences have been an issue for the QA agencies. But having the right people and a fair balance of stakeholders represented on the QA agency's Board may help mitigate some of the external influences. The findings indicated that the composition of the HE QA agency's board with representation of various stakeholders was an issue open for much debate for various stakeholders, especially HEIs. Two observations were made by the stakeholders regarding representativeness of the QA agency's board (Section 4.2.1.2 – *Representativeness of the MQA board*). The first observation was the positive reception of private HEIs to be included as members of the QA agency's board. The second observation was the dissatisfaction of current unequal representations in which the process of selecting members to the board did not appear to be well received by the stakeholders. In light of these two observations by the stakeholders and also based on document analysis (Document[4]) Figure 5.5 illustrates the current composition of the board membership in the MQA governing board.

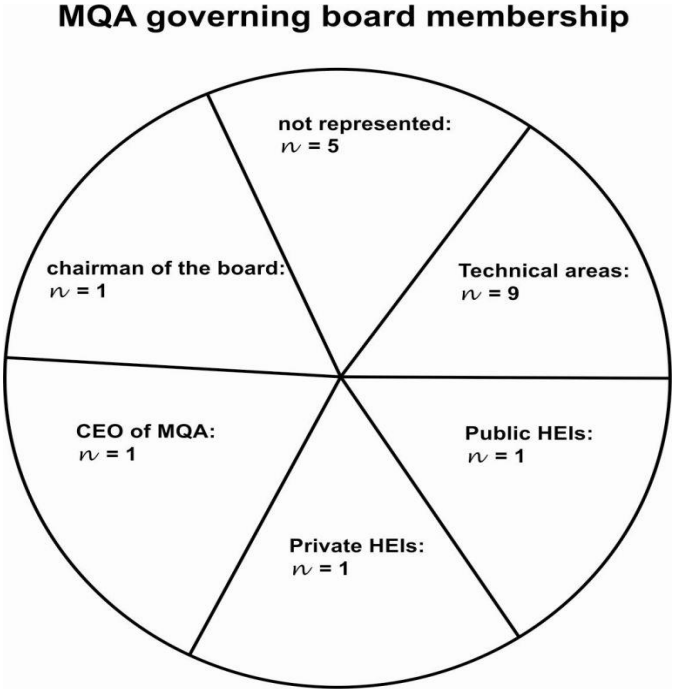

Figure 5.5. Representativeness of the MQA board

As can be seen in Figure 5.5, analysis of the terms of reference of the MQA board (Document[4]) indicated that while nine out of 13 members were appointed in their personal capacity, four members were selected in their official capacity representing four stakeholder groups. The remaining nine members had to be selected from various professional academic/ technical areas. These areas were, the Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF), health, Sharia and law, vocational training, educational philosophy and curriculum, management, business and accounting, Engineering and applied science, information communication technology, and fisheries and agriculture. It is worth noting that these professional academic/ technical areas do not include some main economic sectors such as tourism, construction, chamber of commerce, civil service and teaching, areas that seem to be covered by a larger percentage of courses offered by the HEIs. While this composition allowed appointing members who represent these technical areas, it is not clear in the terms of reference of MQA board (Document[4]) whether they should be selected on their personal capacity or official capacity. However, looking at the position of the appointed members, it seemed that they were appointed in their official capacity. Selecting and appointing board members in their professional capacity is what is advocated in the European standards in a European review (ENQA, 2006). Nonetheless, the findings suggest that what makes a big difference is

fair and equal representation in the membership of the Board rather than the capacity of members; whether it is official or professional.

Document analysis also revealed that there were not any representative positions for professional associations or industry representations from powerful industries such as the tourism, construction and chamber of commerce. Consequently, the lack of fair representation had implications for the integration of some stakeholders — especially major employers of the graduates. Contrary to the Maldives model, as noted in section 2.4.1.3, in Malaysia and South Africa, professional as well as industry bodies or organised labour are represented in their HE QA agency boards (Parliament of Malaysia, 2007)..

An issue related to membership of the board is that of conflict of interest within the governing board of a QA agency. The findings revealed that some Board members, representing more than one organisation, acted to protect their own interests (Section 4.2.1.2 – *Conflict of interest*). This was seen as a conflict of interest by HEI stakeholder group. By pointing out this issue, the stakeholders argued that conflict of interest was detrimental to the functionality of the board and overall well being of the QA agency. This adverse effect of conflict of interest concurs with Carlson and Davidson's (1999) finding that conflict of interest in such boards ultimately does a lot of harm with increased animosity, destroying trust, and making it difficult for the board to address issues that matter most (Section 2.4.1.3). Based on various individual interests highlighted by the stakeholders in this study (4.2.1.2 – *Conflict of interest*) conflict of interest may be conceptualised at three levels. Figure 5.6 shows the levels of conflict of interest seen in the MQA board membership.

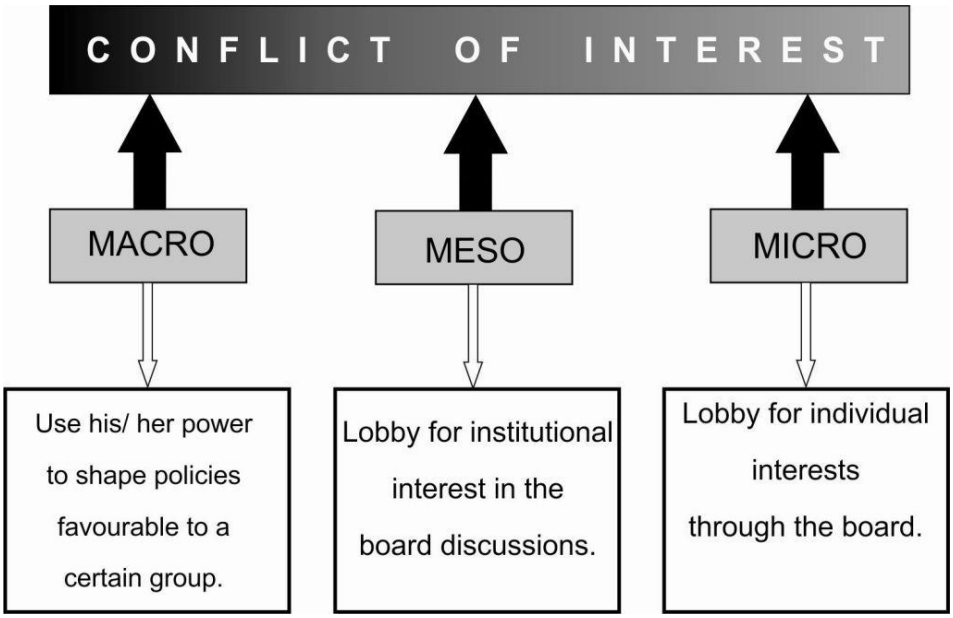

Figure 5.6. The levels of conflict of interest at MQA board

As illustrated in Figure 5.6, three levels of conflict of interest were found in this study. The concept in Figure 5.6, investigation of conflict of interest is drawn from the analysis of the levels of influence (Dopfer, Foster, & Potts, 2004) asserted by the Board members for their personal benefit. Dopfer et al. used micro-meso-macro architecture to develop an analytical framework which can be applied to analyse the levels of influence or conflict of interest. Macro level conflict of interest was the worst case scenario noted by participants, where some of the members exerted their senior government position to approve policies that were particularly beneficial to a certain group(s), through the board and if necessary exerted influence over the agency to approve that policy. The Meso level conflict of interest was mid-range where some board members, particularly some private HEIs lobbied for their own institutional interests in the board discussions at times collectively. The minimal level was the micro level where some members in a position of conflict of interest; for instance where a person is a HE stakeholder and a MQA board member, lobbied for individual interests. Some stakeholders pinpointed that one board member having two or more roles highlighted the conflict. This was in accordance with Davis and Stark's (2001) assertion that one person holding two roles may experience situations where the two roles conflict. The findings indicated that this minimal level of conflict may not be avoidable especially given the reality of the Maldives as a Small State.

The findings did not provide many opinions from the stakeholders with regards to how one may mitigate against conflict of interest. The only suggestion that came up in the findings was to simply not select members who have a conflict of interest (Section 4.2.1.2 – *Conflict of interest of MQA board members*). In other words, disclosure of involvement in the HE system should be sought prior to invitation onto the Board. Alternatively, as noted by Davis and Stark (2001), the Board can ask people with potential conflict to be excluded from discussions where conflict may arise (Section 2.4.1.3). Another measure against conflict of interest – somewhat indirect – is proposed by an European review which suggested that separation of quality assurance agencies from the government functions and the HE institutions can have a mitigation effect against any risk of conflict of interest (ENQA, 2006). That some stakeholders expressed their discontent about unequal representation of private HEIs in the board (Section 4.2.1.3 – *Representativeness of the MQA board*) showed that the process was not considered transparent. Therefore, this may indicate that equal representation of all relevant stakeholders in the Board increases transparency which in turn help mitigate against conflict of interest.

5.2.3 Transparency across all the elements in the HE QA system.

One of the reoccurring findings in this study was the importance of transparency, identified as an attribute under all three QA elements. Therefore, this section combines findings in each element with regards to transparency. Figure 5.7 illustrates the cross cutting nature of transparency across all three elements for strengthening the higher education QA system.

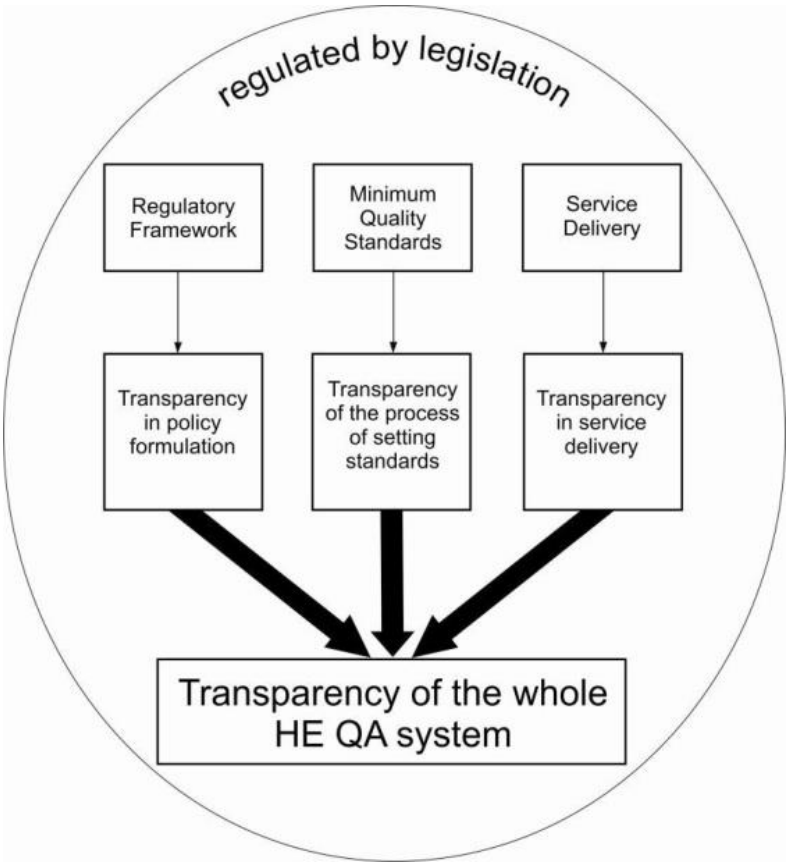

Figure 5.7. Transparency across all the elements

As illustrated in Figure 5.7, the findings of this study indicate that increasing transparency should begin by ensuring transparency in policy formulation through unbiased decision-making (Section 4.2.1.2 – *Transparency in policy formulation*). A lack of transparency in policy formulation can have implications for how the regulatory framework is developed and adopted. It appeared that the stakeholders were often not aware of how HE QA decisions were made because the process was not properly communicated to them. Therefore, the majority of the stakeholders concurred that they have the right to know how policy decisions are made. A solution proposed by some participants and supported by the literature was to better communicate the decision-making process and procedures, by publishing these documents and making them publically available (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), 2009).

Transparency was raised as an important aspect of the QA system when the study focused on the way in which Minimum Quality Standards are established (Section 4.2.2.1 – *Transparency of the process of setting standards*). The findings suggested that there were two dimensions to this process. First was the process of

setting standards by benchmarking with local industry standards as well as with international partners. By engaging the stakeholders in the process, the standards setting body has the responsibility to ensure it is complied with and the stakeholders become advocates of the standards. A sense of ownership is created among the stakeholders as a result of this involvement (see also Section 5.3.1). Second was communicating the process and outcomes to the stakeholders, general public, clients, students and parents. Availability of these documents through leaflets and the website was noted by the stakeholders as crucial for ensuring transparency of process of setting standards. This is well established in international literature as noted in Section 2.4.1.4. The section notes an European study on HE QA described HE QA standards and guidelines as transparency tools (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), 2010) and some researchers assume that without a transparency arrangement, the operational independence of the QA agency may be undermined (Blackmur, 2008a; European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), 2009). Accessibility of standards and guidelines as suggested by the stakeholders may also enhance the accountability of the QA agency as ascertained by King (2007).

In relation to the third element, service delivery, transparency was identified in the findings as very important for the interest of the general public (particularly the clients) which in turn reflects on the quality of higher education service provision in the country. The findings suggest that HEIs are the biggest stakeholder of HE QA, and are at the forefront of delivery of higher education services, regulated by the QA agency (Section 4.2.3.3 – *Transparency in service delivery*). Some participants in this stakeholder group recognised that public interest and confidence in the HEIs was at stake when it came to access and availability of information on activities of HEIs such as MQA approved academic programs. Transparency of internal QA procedures, as noted by stakeholder group HEIs in this study, is one of the common systematic characteristics of QA in higher education across many countries. Billing (2004) analysed systems theory and compared it with the systemic nature of QA in higher education (Section 2.7.2). He argues that transparency across all three elements of a HE QA system backed by legislation can significantly strengthen the overall HE QA system.

5.2.4 Interrelationship of attributes of the regulatory framework.

As noted in the literature review, a systems theory was adopted to conceptualise QA in HE. The discussion of various findings of this study reinforces the importance of interrelationship of attributes to complement and strengthen the regulatory framework. These interrelationships will be explored in the next section. Though the stakeholders did not point directly to these relationships, this was implied and consistent with the literature review. Figure 5.8 illustrates interrelationships in the element regulatory framework. The relationships that show systemic characteristics (Pidwirny, 2006b) of HE QA will be discussed in light of this figure.

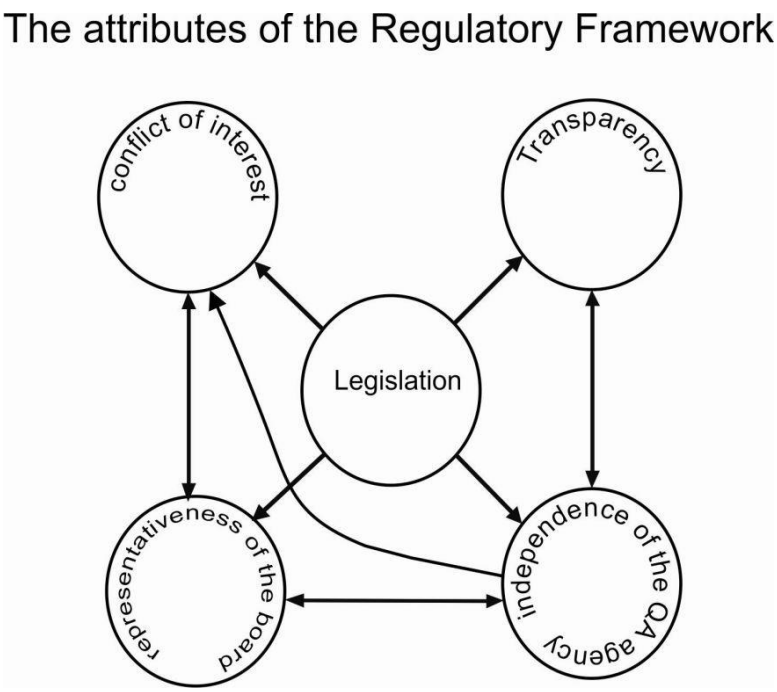

Figure 5.8. Interrelationship between the attributes of the element Regulatory Framework

Figure 5.8 shows that there were considerable interrelationships and in some instances, interdependence amongst the attributes of the element regulatory framework. The most significant and essential attribute was legislation (see also Section 5.2.1) which not only holds the other attributes under regulatory framework but the entire QA system. For instance, the interrelationship between legislation and independence of the QA system was shown by the stakeholders' view that legislation was important to minimise the external influence over the QA agency, thereby, enhancing the independence of the agency. This was in line with the ENQA (2006) report that pointed out that, through legislation, the QA agency can get full legal authority to enforce HE QA regulations. The interrelationship between legislation

and representativeness of the board is evident. By clearly outlining in the legislation, the functions, appointment process, terms of reference, remuneration, tenure and other matters related to the board, it can ensured that everybody concerned will have a better understanding of the system, therefore minimising complaints about Board membership. The link between legislation and conflict of interest showed that with clear functions and roles of the board outlined in the legislation, there will be less room for conflict of interest. The legislation will also allow more transparent appeal processes through a legal process rather than just leaving it to those who make the decisions in the first place. The link between legislation and transparency showed that legislation enhances transparency of the QA system (ENQA, 2006; King, 2007).

Findings indicate that independence of the QA agency has interrelationships with attributes of conflict of interest and transparency (Section 4.2.1.2). This was in accordance with an ENQA (2006) review that emphasised the separation of quality assurance agencies from the government functions as well as HE Institutions to ensure transparency and mitigate against any risk of conflict of interest. However, as illustrated in Figure 5.4, the document analysis revealed that a complete separation of the HE QA agency from all stakeholders in general and the government is not a realistic scenario in Small States. The findings of this study suggest that it will be difficult for the QA agency to work without the involvement of the stakeholders. Also, there is some recent literature (Skolnik, 2010) that suggests stakeholder involvement in QA processes should actually be sought and facilitated. The various issues raised by stakeholders such as unequal representation of the stakeholders in the regulatory board (see Sections 4.2.1.2 and 5.2.2.2) point to the fact that agency bureaucrat(s) will not be able to run a QA system alone. Also, as illustrated in Figure 5.3, all stakeholders have some influence on the QA agency, MQA in this case. Also relevant to this issue, as discussed in Section 5.2.2.2, a balanced involvement of all stakeholders in the affairs of the QA agency through the regulatory board is actually stressed by all stakeholders. The same trend is also seen in international best practice in countries such as Australia, Malaysia and South Africa (Office of Legislative Drafting and Publishing, 2011; Parliament of Malaysia, 2007; Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, 2008). The ENQA review's emphasis on this separation may suggest this is possible in Europe or other bigger more developed nations; but

the findings of this study as explained above, suggest it is quite challenging to do so in Small States.

There is a correlation between transparency and operational independence. The ENQA (2006) review points out that transparency, by having required documentation made public, can enhance operational independence of the QA agency. Similarly, the stakeholders' views indicated that representativeness of the board can also have a strong effect on the independence of the QA agency. This was shown by the fact that independent members on the Board with equal representation can contribute towards a more independent and strong QA agency. This observation was in line with the ENQA (2006) review, which states that having a small board is a key characteristic of a strong QA agency. The stakeholders also related representativeness of the board and conflict of interest. This was an indication that the membership composition of the board can increase conflict of interest, corroborating Carlson and Davidson's (1999) assertion that conflict of interest affects the running of the board (Section 2.4.1.3). While these interrelationships under the element Regulatory Framework strengthen the system's characteristics of the HE QA system, other interrelationships under the element such as minimum quality standards and service delivery will be discussed in Sections 5.3 and 5.4, respectively.

5.3 MINIMUM QUALITY STANDARDS

The quality of any QA system needs some basis to monitor quality. Therefore, setting minimum standards to ensure the programs and institutions have necessary capacity to deliver services that meet the agreed standards is an essential part of a QA system. Findings from this study (Section 4.2.2.1) indicate that quality assurance systems need minimum standards, reaffirming Bridges' (1997) emphasis that the quality of higher education can only be assessed and assured against certain minimum standards. This is particularly important in the Maldives in light of the rapidly increasing number of public and private HEIs and the diversity of programs being offered. The key finding under the element focused on the process of setting standards; and the scope or what is covered in standards.

5.3.1 Process of setting standards.

Findings indicate that the stakeholders realised that required standards and guidelines were paramount for the higher education QA system. It was also noted

that the procedure of making decisions regarding minimum standards was equally critical in a QA system (Section 4.2.2.1). As a general QA process it requires adopting a transparent and consultative process as discussed under the regulatory framework section. Two aspects equally important as the process of setting of standards were: what standards and guidelines are required and available and the process of setting these standards and developing the subsequent guidelines. The third attribute, transparency in setting standards, is discussed under the first element in Section 5.2.3, Transparency across all elements in the HE QA system.

As noted in the findings, the stakeholders need to understand the importance of minimum requirements in the form of standards and guidelines for various services provided by the HEIs, as a critical part of any HE QA system (Section 4.2.2.1). However, document analysis and interviews revealed that there was only one guideline for standard, which was the MNQF, and a few supporting guidelines were developed by the MQA for HE QA in the Maldives. This is only a fraction of what is required when compared to other QA systems such as those found in Australia and European countries (Section 2.4.2) where independent mechanisms are set-up to develop the required standards (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), 2009; Higher Education Standards Panel [Australian Government], 2013) It can also be argued that since MNQF is a national framework it is neither a standard nor a guideline, because it is a framework that drives the whole higher education and quality assurance.

In Australia, Malaysia, European countries and South Africa, standards and guidelines are developed for all critical areas of HE QA such as provider registration, accreditation, academic audit, program standards, teaching, research and learning resources. (Higher Education Standards Panel [Australian Government], 2013), and Europe (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), 2009). Figure 5.9 presents a summary from the document analysis of available standards and guidelines in the Maldives and those that are missing from the current system, compared to the system in Australia and European countries.

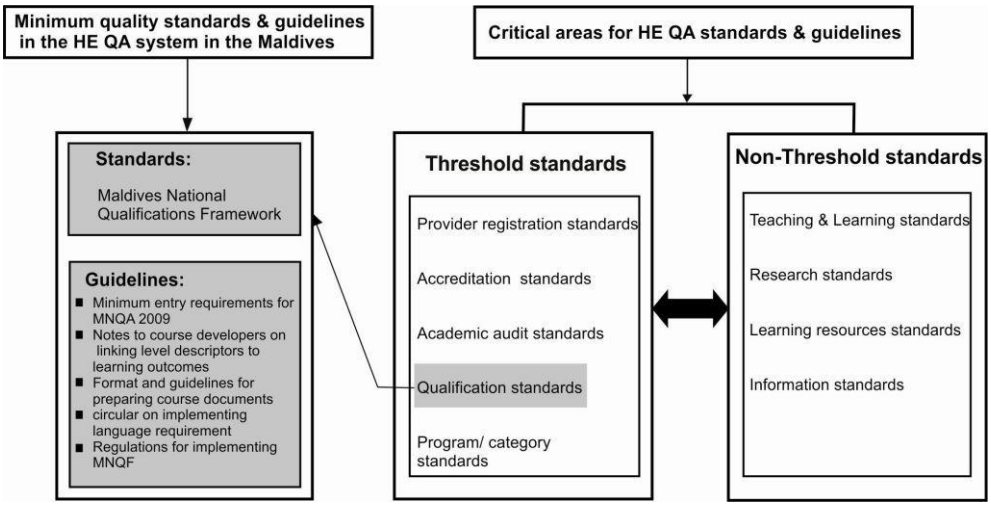

Figure 5.9. Critical areas for HE QA standards and guidelines

As can be seen in Figure 5.9, when compared to European (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), 2009) and Australian QA standards and guidelines (Higher Education Standards Panel [Australian Government], 2013), the system in the Maldives only had one standards framework document which was the National Qualifications Framework together with some supporting guidelines. The findings suggest that in the Maldives there was a lack of standards and guidelines for threshold areas (also refer to Section 4.2.2.1 – *Standards and guidelines*) such as provider registration, accreditation, academic audit and program standards. Document analysis showed a gap in the Maldives. Therefore, MQA was required to develop standards and guidelines for non-threshold areas at service delivery point at HEIs such as teaching and learning, research, learning resources and information. This reality concurs with the findings of a survey of HE QA in Small States of Commonwealth (Stella, 2010) highlighting that the lack of standards and guidelines to cover all aspects of a QA system is a major issue for Small States that are seeking to strengthen their QA systems.

Document analysis also suggested that the Maldives National Qualifications Framework (MNQF) was the key guideline shaping the Maldives HE QA system. As noted in Figure 5.9, it is the main standard guideline in HE QA in the Maldives and it sets the minimum requirements for all post-secondary qualifications. Therefore, it was used as a benchmark for academic programs. To strengthen the MQA, the revised MNQF (Section 4.2.2.1) has recognised a need for international benchmarking, flexibility, and responsiveness to the national, economic and social development of the country (Maldives Qualifications Authority, 2010b). This was

consistent with Laugharne's (2002) assertion that one of the chief aims of introducing qualifications frameworks is to increase national and international credibility and comparability of qualifications.

As evident in Figure 5.9, program/ category standards are a key area where standards need to be developed. Document analysis (Document[6] and Document[10]) revealed that the current set-up in the Maldives to develop program standards is only targeted to vocational level qualifications (Section 4.2.2.1 – *Standards and guidelines*). Findings indicated that there was no process in the Maldives to develop program/ category standards for qualifications for Diploma and above. Though the national qualification framework is a unified framework that includes all qualifications from Certificate 1 to PhD, and gives qualification guidelines and level descriptors to all 10 levels of the framework, national competency standards (category/ program standards) are available only for the Technical and Vocational Education (TVET) programs (qualifications from Certificate 1 to Certificate 4) suggesting a gap in the QA system. One of the reasons for this gap is that the process seems fragmented and there is no national set-up to develop these standards. Contrary to this, international QA practices in countries such as Australia and European countries have a national process for setting these standards (Section 2.4.2 – p. 48) as shown in Figure 5.9 (Higher Education Standards Panel [Australian Government], 2013).

In a national standards-setting process, industry involvement is critical. Industry involvement was justified because industry was the best judge on the quality of higher education as the employer of graduates (Section 4.2.2.2 – *Industry linkages*). The industry stakeholders in this study noted that industry bodies should be involved in designing programs because they recruit the HE graduates and are most in touch with the knowledge and skills required for specific industries or professions. Similar to this suggestion, an Australian study (Coates, 2010) found that industry engagement with HEIs should be a crucial input for standards of HEIs (Section 2.4.2.3).

The findings of this study exposed the situation in the Maldives in respect to the limited linkages between the industry bodies and the HEIs, as well as the quality assurance agency. It emerged that there was very minimal or no consultation between the HEIs and the industry (Section 4.2.2.2 – *Industry linkages*). Industry stakeholder

groups noted that the content of the programs delivered was not designed bearing in mind the requirements of the industry. Despite this reality, a perfect scenario of a quality higher education would be when the employment sector or the industry readily accepts graduates. The Seventh National Development Plan of the Maldives, considers industry recognition of the qualifications as one of the main objectives of developing and strengthening higher education quality assurance mechanisms in the country (Ministry of Planning and National Development, 2007). For the MQA stakeholders, at least, industry-regulated quality appeared very attractive as they were in the position to be the best judge since the graduates ultimately join their workforce. Therefore, industry recognition of higher education graduates could be an indicator of the quality of higher education.

The findings suggested that a continuous two-way exchange of ideas and inputs between industry bodies and the HEIs can be adopted (Section 4.2.2.2 – *Industry linkages*). Industry stakeholders noted that one way of making this linkage is inviting industry representatives to the university/ college councils. Such successful models are seen in the developed world (D'Este & Patel, 2007; Gulbrandsen & Smeby, 2005), which could also yield benefits in Small States.

The Maldives National Qualifications Framework, which is the main standard used in the Maldives, encouraged the HEIs to build linkages with industry through workplace training. Document analysis indicated (see also Section 5.3.2.1) that there was hope in the Maldives that with the full implementation of the MNQF, HEIs would be working closer than ever with various industries. It was, therefore, an indication that some work had been done by the quality assurance agency in this respect.

While the involvement of industry was realised, findings suggested that program standards setting process in the Maldives was only for vocational level qualifications for Competency Based Skill Training (CBST) (Document[10]; see also Section 2.2.2.1). These program standards were only developed for five sectors: construction, fisheries and agriculture, social service, tourism, and transport (TVET Maldives, 2013). Since these standards were developed for vocational education only, there were no program/ sector standards qualifications for Diploma and above. That means a vast number of higher education programs delivered in the country had no national benchmark for the standards of its contents. If the International best

practice (Section 2.4.2 – p. 48) as is the case in Australia and European Union countries (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), 2009; Higher Education Standards Panel [Australian Government], 2013), is to be seen as an example, this has to change by setting up a mechanism for developing national program/ category standards for all qualifications; not just for CBST.

The findings also noted issues raised by the stakeholders in relation to the implementation of the revised MNQF, which was introduced in 2009. A two year period from September 2009 to September 2011 was given for the HEIs to prepare their mechanisms to fully implement the MNQF, but the findings indicate that there was a sudden change of the documentations without consultation or even dissemination within the stakeholders. Therefore, in the case of the Maldives, it emerged that even if there were some documents, the level of acceptance by the stakeholders especially HEIs was minimal (Section 4.2.2.1) because the HEIs felt the process was neither transparent nor consultative. Nevertheless, the progress of developing and implementing MNQF was consistent with the observation made by Keevy et al. (2008) and Stella (2010) that Small States are very active in the establishment of national qualification frameworks as a reactionary process rather than a genuine attempt to build consensus and ownership by all stakeholders. Furthermore, for the whole HE QA system to function, as pointed above, there was a need for other standards and guidelines including a strand for the actual course content for specific professional areas, which falls under program/ category standards noted in Figure 5.9.

The above discussions indicate the importance of engaging with the stakeholders. In this regard, the findings revealed conflicting accounts of the QA agency's performance (Section 4.2.2.1). While MQA insisted that "a lot of consultations with the public and private service providers" were held to produce necessary standards and guidelines for HE QA; other stakeholders, especially HEIs and industry stakeholders considered that the MQA was not engaging other stakeholders as much as they would have liked. The stakeholders also expressed their view that engaging with them in developing standards would give them a sense of ownership. This view endorsed the literature review that the trust and confidence of

the stakeholders is gained only if standards and guidelines are realistic and achievable (Manyaga, 2008).

Although the stakeholders' views on engagement was justified as discussed above, some of the reasons expressed for not endorsing new standards and guidelines contradict international literature (Harman, 1998a; Harris, 1997). For instance, some stakeholders expressed concerns regarding the approach adopted by the MQA in developing standards and guidelines arguing that they were taken from the internet (see Section 4.2.2.1 – *Standards and guidelines*). International literature argues that obtaining QA information from reliable sources on the internet should not be seen as problematic as long as they are adapted to fit with the local contexts (Harris, 1997). However, this is only the initial part of the process which then requires local validation and customisation. The latter process seemed to be the concern of other stakeholders.

Document analysis in this study indicated that some documents were developed by working with international partners. In fact, the MNQF (Document[1]) stated that their level descriptors were adopted from the Scottish Qualifications Authority. However, the stakeholders were not concerned about the adaptation of the Scottish level descriptors for MNQF (Section 4.2.2.1 – *Standards and guidelines*). This could be due to the fact that the level descriptors were only one part of the MNQF. Document analysis (Document[1]) showed that MNQF actually has five elements in it: the actual qualification table which signifies the qualifications framework, qualifications definitions, level descriptors, quality assurance guidelines, and credit system. Therefore, the Scottish level descriptors are only one element in the MNQF and the level of borrowing is not overwhelming. This indicates that the process of developing the revised MNQF was a balanced process adopting international best practices as well as acknowledging local requirements. With this approach the MQA appeared to have sought "international benchmarking of qualifications" (Document[1]). This approach reaffirmed Harman's (1998a) observation that there is a significant degree of borrowing by national systems of higher education from others. However, as noted above, these procedures need to be adapted as well as adopted, which means assurance must be provided so that they fit well within the culture of the particular system.

In addition to the issues relating to the implementation of the revised MNQF, there were critical issues concerning the introduction of academic audit. These concerns by the stakeholders mainly evolved because other than MQNF, there seemed to be nothing with regards to other standards and qualifications required for HE QA to function. One such example was the lack of standards and guidelines for both internal (for HEIs) and external quality assurance (Section 4.2.2.1 – *Standards and guidelines*), described as academic audit in international literature (Section 2.4.3.2 – *Academic audit*) as defined by Vlăsceanu et al (2007) As noted by the stakeholders, this emanated from the fact that MQA was unable to come up with manuals and guidelines necessary to start the academic audit. Findings indicate that this may be due to a lack of capacity of the MQA as well as bureaucracy in the board. This was probably why some stakeholders suggested more stakeholder involvement in the process to help MQA develop these necessary documents. This indicates that stakeholder involvement can help develop the standards. As discussed in Section 5.4.3, increased use of collaboration can help overcome issues related to lack of human resources. Skolnik (2010) agrees with this view and suggests that input from all stakeholders should be sought and facilitated (Section 2.4.1.3) in academic audit. Even if Skolnik does not explicitly mention stakeholder involvement in the process of developing standards for academic audit, it can be assumed that it is an important part of academic audit.

Despite the difficulties experienced by Small States and countries at the early stages of developing a Higher Education QA system, the challenge is finding a way forward to develop realistic and achievable standards and guidelines for HE QA. As discussed in Chapter Two (Section 2.5), the reality in Small States is that they do not have rich economic or human resource capacities compared to more developed countries (Harman, 1996). Hence, the fit for purpose approach (Harvey & Green, 1993) in HE QA where the local context is considered in the design can help gain the trust and confidence of local stakeholders. Therefore, a local solution supported by some international assistance, in which all the stakeholders participate in a process to develop required guidelines can also instil a sense of ownership as indicated by most of the stakeholders in this study (Section 4.2.2.1 – *Stakeholder involvement in setting standards*).

5.3.2 Scope of standards.

Three interrelated sub-attributes were identified as key findings regarding the scope of standards (Section 4.2.2.2 – *Quality of higher education*). These were: how to ensure the quality of the programs was high, how these quality indicators related to external benchmarks such as the global rankings or other regional benchmarking options, and the appropriateness of the standards in developing knowledge and skills that industry/ professional associations value.

5.3.2.1 Quality of higher education.

One of the findings in this study indicated that the stakeholders, especially industry participants, had the view that HE should prepare students for the world of work within a highly competitive environment. Since HE systems produce graduates employed in various industries, appropriate minimum standards aligned with respective industry knowledge and skills should be a key considerations. Such an approach will help graduates improve their job performance. See Section 4.2.3.2 for more detailed discussion. Harman (1998a) points out that output of higher education and suitability of graduates to meet workplace needs, concerns all interested QA stakeholders. Therefore as noted in other countries (D'Este & Patel, 2007; Gulbrandsen & Smeby, 2005) and as mentioned in Section 5.3.1 (see also Section 4.2.2.2 – *Quality of higher education*), involving the industry as part of the standard-setting team was considered a mark of relevance and consequently quality by many.

The findings pointed to a gap with the current QA system and argued that local industry groups who can provide local requirements to meet industry expectations should be involved. Such involvement can add more relevance and quality to academic programs. Literature (Section 2.4.2 – p. 50) showed that linkages to the industry (also refer to Section 5.3.1) could also contribute towards good teaching (authentic learning which is closely linked to industry needs) and enhance the quality of student learning and their motivation (Jackson, 1998).

The industry stakeholders who participated in this study also highlighted concerns about the relevance of academic programs, the few number of students that graduated every year, and the attitude and mindset of graduates produced by many of the HEIs (Section 4.2.2.2 – *Quality of higher education*). The newly introduced revised MNQF could help overcome some of these issues, especially attitude and mindset of graduates, to some extent. The review of the MNQF was a shift from the

previous time-based framework to a competency-based framework to allow the HEIs a guide in terms of minimum competency standards for each qualification level through the level descriptors. As discussed in Section 5.3.1, MNQF has five elements in it: the qualification table, qualifications definitions, level descriptors, quality assurance guidelines, and credit system (Document[1]). One of the five generic outcomes of each level in level descriptors is autonomy, accountability and working with others. If the academic programs are designed with the inclusion of this component, it could address the issue of attitude and mindset of graduates (or work ethics) to some extent mentioned by the industry stakeholders, because then academic programs would have content to teach the students autonomy, accountability and working with others

Document analysis showed that the MNQF was established "with a view to provide learners, employers, and education providers with qualifications that are nationally standardised and quality assured" (Document1). However, as discussed under the Section *Standards and guidelines*, program/ category standards (with content details of specific programs) are not developed as a follow-up to the MNQF. This might have implications for overall quality of higher education programs.

5.3.2.2 Global rankings.

The literature (Harvey, 2008; Teichler, 2008) talks of ranking HEIs within a global hierarchy (Section 2.4.2.4); however, the findings indicate that HEI stakeholders were mindful that the Maldives HEIs may not make the global ranking, but some form of ranking at the national level may be possible (Section 4.2.2.2 – *Global rankings*). The Stakeholders pointed out that ranking the HEIs for quality may provide information for potential clients regarding the best HEIs for certain programs, but it also risks creating a concept of elite HEIs by making other universities look second class (Pillay & Kimber, 2009). To address this issue, Pillay and Kimber argue that quality indicators and standards should therefore be structured against the local context and professional practice instead of focusing on international expectations, which was backed by the findings of this study. A local focus may help reduce the push for elitism by the ranked HEIs (R. Williams & Dyke, 2007). This is specifically important for Small States that are just starting to grow their higher education sector. Some international literature (Marginson & Wende, 2009) cautions that these global rankings often act as a marketing gimmick for

industrialised countries, a claim which was supported by the HEI's stakeholder group in this study. Therefore, both the literature review and the findings of this study point to the marketing aspect of ranking and particularly global rankings. Whether it is bad or beneficial is debatable and perhaps a bit premature for the Maldives.

On the positive side, the findings suggest that global rankings force HEIs to be transparent about what their quality is and inform students and the public about the quality of universities internationally (see Section 4.2.2.2 – *Global ranking*). Similarly, literature suggest that the rankings give a powerful impetus to competitive pressures on the institutions (Marginson & Wende, 2009), which was echoed by the findings of this study. Also, the claim that rankings may promote a healthy competitive environment among institutions and scholars (Teichler, 2008) appears to concur with most of the participants who were asked the question about rankings. This may contribute promote the quality of higher education, but it is unlikely that the participants were aware of the indicators and standards of performance against which the universities are assessed and ranked.

5.3.3 Strengthening the development of Minimum Quality Standards.

The above discussions emphasise the interconnections between process and scope of setting standards. Figure 5.10 illustrates these connections and interrelationships.

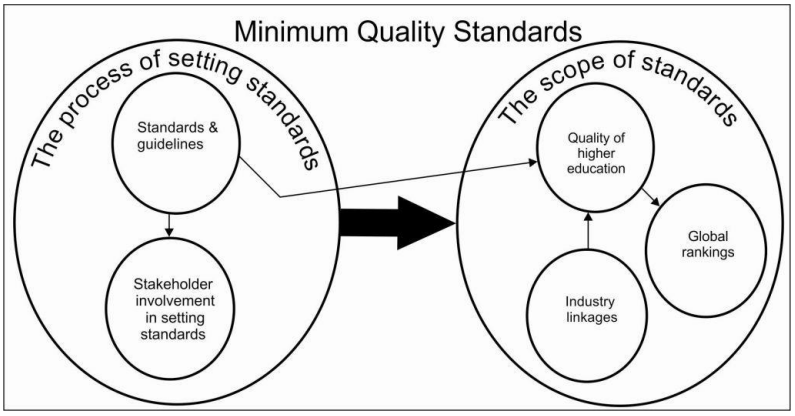

Figure 5.10. Interrelationships between the attributes of the element Minimum Quality Standards

The process of setting national standards, especially the sector and industry level standards and guidelines, had a direct effect on the three sub-attributes of the scope of standards. The quality and relevance of higher education, a major concern of the Industry stakeholders, was seen as central to how the minimum quality

standards were developed and used as benchmarks of quality. According to views expressed by the Industry stakeholders (Sections 4.2.2.2 and 5.3.1), concerns such as 'industry readiness' of graduates in terms of their mindset as well as their technical specialisations seemed to be largely a result of an inability of HEIs to appreciate what is required as minimum standards. The literature review in Chapter Two showed that the scope of standards in higher education covers a host of areas for minimum requirements (Section 2.4.2.2). In addition to teaching and research, physical facilities, services, human resource capacity, quality assurance, and academic programs are common areas (University of Dar Es Salaam, 2010). Similarly, Brooks (2005) argues that resources such as library size and research support should be considered as indicators of quality. Therefore, a lack of these resources and student support services might have adverse effects on the overall quality of higher education at those institutions. Often the standards are narrowly concerned with program standards only and not the standard of resources both physical and human required to deliver the proposed program at an agreed level of competence. Also, Jackson (1998) identified good teaching, scholarship of teaching, quality of student learning experiences and the motivation and abilities of the learners themselves who engage with the learning process in order to achieve their full potential, as conditions to produce quality graduates. Therefore, to develop a comprehensive set of minimum standards can be an onerous challenge.

5.4 SERVICE DELIVERY

Service delivery was the crucial third element identified in this study for a higher education quality assurance system. As noted earlier, this is not independent of the previous two elements. After establishing a regulatory framework, and developing minimum quality standards, the service delivery was the stage where the QA outcomes were materialised. The findings note three interrelated attributes for monitoring the service provider and the actual service delivery.

5.4.1 Accreditation and academic audit.

To ensure the delivery of HE services and products are compliant with the QA requirements, a robust QA system needs to ensure that HEIs have the necessary resources and capacities to deliver what they claim. The findings revealed that the Maldives HE QA system did not have institutional accreditation and program

accreditation (Section 4.2.3) practised elsewhere. Also, they had a licensing/ registration procedure for HEIs that was carried out separately by MoE and had nothing to do with HE QA. This set-up contradicts the literature (ENQA, 2006) that institutional accreditation is important to determine whether the institution in question has appropriate and credible structures and mechanisms in place to ensure quality of its programs. The contradiction was seen in the sense that licensing was not part of the HE QA process and institutional accreditation was not carried out at all. International practices for accreditation of HE service providers and accreditation of the programs was carried out as a cyclical process as seen in other countries (refer to Section 2.4.3.2 - *Accreditation*). Therefore, in some established QA systems (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2013; Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, 2012), the accreditation process is necessary before granting the initial licence or registration to a HE Institution. The approval of the whole process (registration and accreditation) is given for a certain period of time and it has to be renewed after that agreed time (Stella, 2004; Vlăsceanu et al., 2007). This is done to ensure the HEIs maintain the standards they had when the licence was issued.

Findings showed that for courses and programs, the MQA only did program approval (Section 4.2.3.1 – *Program accreditation*), which is called program accreditation in many other countries (Vlăsceanu et al., 2007). Given the nature of the Maldives as a Small State it is not surprising that it has its own unique QA features as well as fitting in with regional features (Keevy et al., 2008; Stella, 2010) such as in the Indian Ocean, Caribbean, and South Pacific (Section 2.6.3). However, an indefinite approval of a program without a time limit, as was the case in the Maldives, is not the practice elsewhere (Stella, 2004) even among Small States in the Caribbean (Accreditation Council of Trinad and Tobago, n.d.; Barbados Accreditation Council, 2010; University Council of Jamaica, 2011), the South Pacific (Samoa Qualifications Authority, 2011; Vanuatu National Training Council, 2004) or in the Indian Ocean (Mohamedbhai, 2006; Seychelles Qualifications Authority, 2008). The above cited Small States, in contrast, adopted a regular review of programs accreditation within the process of institutional accreditation.

Both program and institutional accreditation were noted by the stakeholders as very important QA processes (Sections 4.2.3.1). However, there was little detailed understanding, among the stakeholders, of these processes as shown in the interview

data. Likewise, document analysis revealed there was a lack of a clear system being followed by the MQA. In contrast, the literature (Vlăsceanu et al., 2007) showed that there were certain systematic cyclic processes for accreditation being followed across many countries (Vlăsceanu et al., 2007). Figure 5.11 illustrates the overall accreditation processes.

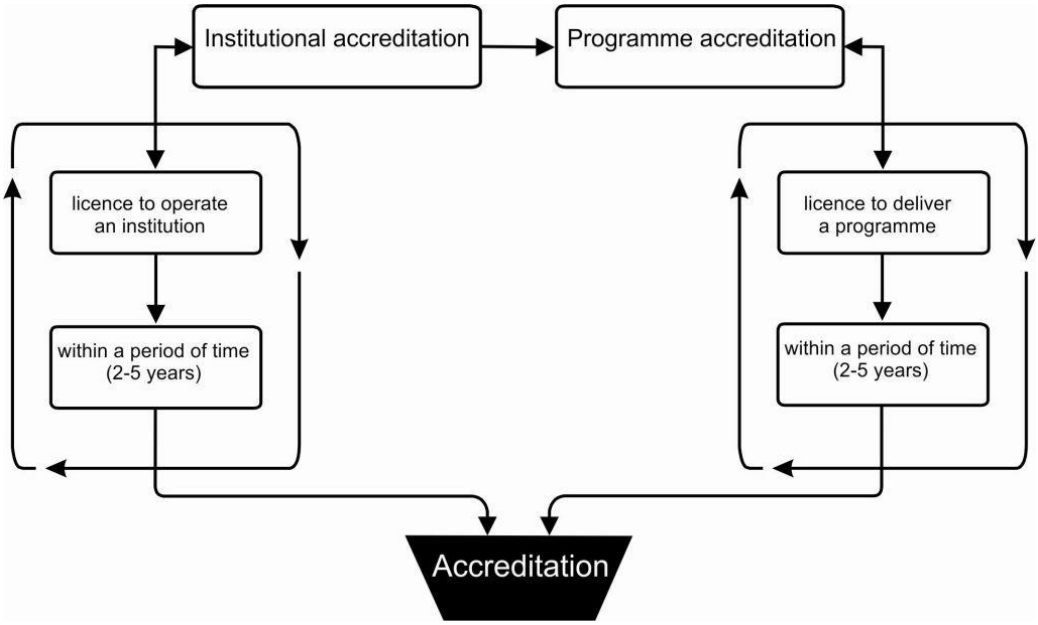

Figure 5.11. Accreditation processes

As displayed in Figure 5.11, accreditation (both institutional and program) is a cyclical process in many countries (Vlăsceanu et al., 2007), not a one-time process as carried out in the Maldives in the name of program approval. In this cyclical process, after an initial licensing or accreditation decision to operate a HEI or to deliver an academic program for a certain period of time, the HEIs are required to seek renewal of the accreditation.

Related to the above accreditation is the notion of academic audit process which was another crucial HE QA process noted in the findings. However, it is important to highlight the fact that findings also revealed that this important process was not yet implemented in the Maldives. International literature and best practices in other countries show that academic audit is a comprehensive review of either an academic institution or program that is primarily focused on its accountability (Vlăsceanu et al., 2007), which is similar to the desire expressed by the participants in this study. However, the actual practice of academic audit in regions like Europe (Bernardino & Marques, 2009) focused on institutional audit rather than program

audit (Section 2.4.3.2 – *Academic audit*) where the program audit is a subset of the institutional audit.

When the systems from other Small States were analysed (Section 2.6.3), findings indicated that a process called *supervision* was currently in place in the Maldives, which is apparently not practised in any other country. It became clear that the stakeholders did not have a very clear distinction between accreditation and regular audits of HEIs and their programs. Contrary to that, the international literature (Section 2.4.3.2) showed both a clear distinction and connection between the two as illustrated in Figure 5.12.

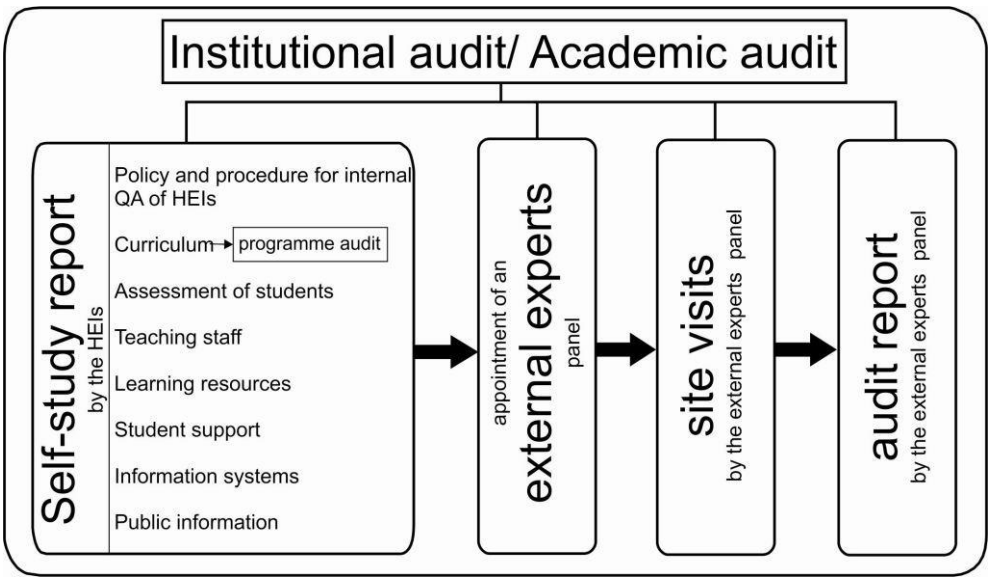

Figure 5.12. Institutional/ Academic audit process

The findings of the current study suggested that while the stakeholders valued academic audit, they were not very clear about the exact processes (Section 4.2.3.2 – *Institutional audit*). However, as illustrated in Figure 5.12, literature shows that there are four stages in which an academic audit is completed. These are: (1) self-evaluation by HEIs, (2) appointment of external experts' panel, (3) site visits by the experts' panel, and (4) the audit report. In this process, while curriculum is usually included in the evaluation of the institution (Vlăsceanu et al., 2007), it can be interpreted that program audit is a sub-set of institutional audit. Many researchers note that institutional audit was the most widely practised form of academic audit (Bradley et al., 2008; Commonwealth of Australia, 2009), UK (Hoecht, 2006; Lewis, 2009) and Europe (Gvaramadze, 2008; Van Damme, 2000).

Despite a lack of awareness of the exact process of academic audit, the stakeholders did mention the existence of some of the processes of academic audit such as audit panel and audit report (Section 4.2.3.2 – *Institutional audit*). Even though academic audit does not have a yes/ no decision—it is seen as a process to help HEIs reach the minimum standards in their delivery process. As a result, follow-up procedures are usually recommended (Kristensen, 2010). Through this follow-up activity, institutions are expected to correct the problems observed and improvements recommended in a certain period of time (Berghe, 1997). Overall, a thorough academic audit determines if the stated aims and objectives of the HEI in the areas evaluated are met (Vlăsceanu et al., 2007). From all four steps of the academic audit, the findings indicated that the stakeholders had a keen interest in making the audit report public (Section 4.2.3.2 – *Institutional audit*), which was in line with many researchers in the field (Jeliazkova & Westerheijden, 2001; Lewis, 2009; Van Vught & Westerheijden, 1994).

Although academic audit was not implemented in the Maldives, it appeared that the participants, especially HEIs, were interested in a QA process because they perceived it as a quality improvement instrument, as opposed to quality control (Section 4.2.3.2 – *Institutional audit*). The participants' discussions about the benefit of academic audit also indicated that the idea of making them, in the capacity of stakeholders, accountable through academic audit, as in the definition of academic audit by Vlăsceanu et al. (2007), did not deter them from supporting the introduction of the process. Participants were supportive of a continuous check of their internal quality assurance mechanisms by the QA agency, which they thought would ultimately encourage them to improve the quality of their programs and their institutional capacity. This level of understanding of academic audit by the participants resonated with international literature (Kristensen, 2010) as well as best practices by leading countries in the field (Section 2.4.3.2 – *Institutional audit*). The link between internal QA of the HEIs and the effectiveness of the academic audit is also raised by Kristensen (2010).

Despite the fact that the stakeholders did not show a detailed understanding of the timeframe in which the academic audit should be conducted, recent developments in the field elsewhere provided insights on this facet of academic audit. In Europe, where the Bologna Process is in full implementation (Bernardino &

Marques, 2009), academic audit is robust and follows a periodic audit process for all HEIs. However, the Australian approach for academic audit, known as compliance assessments as well as quality assessments and accreditation assessments, is different whereby all universities are not subjected to a period review (Section 2.4.3.2 – *Institutional audit*). Originally it was periodic for all universities, but the recent review of QA systems and the creation of a new HE QA agency for Australia coincided with these changes (Edwards, 2012). One of the arguments supporting this change is that if the service delivery of a particular HEI is good and no complaints are received then it is fair to assume there is no need to subject that HEI to an expensive audit process. This may be suitable for mature systems but when countries like the Maldives are in their early stages of establishing a QA system, more monitoring through audits may be appropriate. These new developments in the international best practice suggest academic audit is a progressive review process. How and how often it is applied varies from system to system – as seen in Australia and Europe. It can be triggered by various stakeholders; these can be students, parents or the public. Sometimes, the QA agency may not have to conduct a complete audit as shown in Figure 5.12.

5.4.2 Quality assurance of non-traditional delivery modalities of higher education.

Both interviews and document analysis have suggested that the focus of the Maldives HE QA mechanisms should be on the face-to-face delivery of higher education programs in the local HEIs. However, the reality is, as international literature (Daniel & Kanwar, 2006) shows, that with the advancement in ICT technologies, there are many other delivery modalities apart from face-to-face provision of higher education (Section 2.3.2). Despite the fact that the focus in Maldives HE QA was on face-to-face provision only, there was evidence from interviews that some HEIs are actually in collaborative arrangements with foreign providers (Section 4.2.3.4) in offering twinning and off-shore programs (see also 5.4.3). These sorts of transnational and international HE service providers will grow in the future.

Document analysis revealed that in the Maldives QA system, there was no document or mechanism that provided nationally accepted standards or benchmarks to regulate and monitor quality for other delivery modalities of higher education such

as distance education and e-learning. As mentioned above, findings suggested that there are already delivery modalities other than the traditional face-to-face method and these will only grow. Literature (Rovai & Downey, 2010) shows that in such scenarios, there should be effective QA strategies that would address a wide range of processes to assure quality of higher education services provided through alternative delivery modalities (Section 2.3.2.1). Rovai and Downey note the key areas to focus on are teaching staff selection and their qualifications, professional development of faculty, student support services, and student outcomes.

Findings of this study indicated quality assurance of non-traditional delivery modalities of HE is an area that has not been given much thought by the Ministry of Education and the Maldives quality assurance agency. Therefore, with rapid global expansion there is a real urgency to address this issue. In fact, for the Maldives and other Small States, since they often import higher education (Section 2.3.2), they need to have mechanisms to regulate non-traditional delivery modalities from outside the country. In this front, Malaysia seems to be making headways by regulating foreign qualification offered by distance learning through requiring international providers to form collaborative arrangements with local HEIs such as twinning and off-shore provision (Office of Legislative Drafting and Publishing, 2011). This way, the Malaysian Government can monitor local partners for QA compliance. Such arrangements could be even more vital for Small States due to their vulnerability and exposure to cross-border providers (Pillay & Kimber, 2009).

5.4.3 Collaboration with stakeholders.

Like transparency, collaboration emerged as an important attribute of all three elements of a HE QA system. Collaboration was just as important for the element service delivery as it was for the other two elements: regulatory framework and minimum quality standards. The fact that participants often pointed to the importance of stakeholder representation in the QA agency's board (Sections 4.2.1.2 – *Representativeness of the MQA board*) is an indication that collaboration is important for the element for governance. Similarly, the importance of the involvement of the stakeholders in developing standards and guidelines emerged in the findings (Section 4.2.2.1 – *Stakeholder involvement in setting standards*) discussed under the element minimum quality standards (see Section 5.3.1). While in this study, HE QA is treated as a system (see Section 2.7), the collaboration can be seen as interactions and

interrelations of the parts within the QA system, which is important for a system (Irving, 1999).

Collaboration was a major suggestion by participants in this study to overcome many issues of lack or resources facing the Maldives HE QA agency. The Findings suggested that there was a strong consensus among the stakeholders on having a more robust collaborative arrangement between the stakeholders (Section 4.2.3.4). Similarly, the findings also showed the importance of having linkages between the HEIs and the industry bodies to improve the quality of higher education (Section 4.2.2.2 – *Industry linkages*). Though this issue is rarely addressed in HE QA literature, there are recent studies (Bennett et al., 2010; Kettunen, 2010) that talk about collaboration with the stakeholders as a modern concept (Section 2.4.1.3). It may be necessary to educate the stakeholders about the advantages of collaboration which requires trust and integrity.

As the findings suggested (Section 4.2.1.2 – *Representativeness of the MQA board*) and as discussed earlier in this chapter (see Section 5.2.2.2), the stakeholders in this study strongly supported the involvement of the stakeholders in the QA regulatory board and also in other processes of the QA system. Though some literature suggests separating the QA agency from the government and other stakeholders (ENQA, 2006), the idea of involving the stakeholders in the QA regulatory board is seldom contested. In fact, international QA practices in various countries (Office of Legislative Drafting and Publishing, 2011; Parliament of Malaysia, 2007; Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, 2008) show that distancing stakeholders from the QA decision-making process is neither encouraged nor practised in leading QA systems. This is an indication of the usefulness of collaboration for the element regulatory framework.

The findings in this study revealed the importance of collaboration in the second element identified, setting minimum quality standards. The stakeholders often expressed their support to have a collaborative arrangement between the QA agency and the stakeholders especially HEIs (Section 4.2.2.1 – *Stakeholder involvement in setting standards*) to develop necessary standards and guidelines. This arrangement was suggested by participants citing a lack of minimum standards and guidelines. This is possibly what Houston (2010) noted as the development of negotiated

mechanisms for enhancement by QA agencies instead of control and surveillance in today's shifting approach in HE QA.

The findings suggested that collaboration is important for the element service delivery. One example was the collaboration of the QA agency with the stakeholders through involving them in the QA board as well as in the process of developing QA standards – as discussed above. Also, the QA agency communicating with the stakeholders about the QA processes and having more linkages (Section 4.2.3.4), was seen as a collaborative arrangement as well. This argument is in line with Skolnik's (2010) suggestion that the stakeholders' input should be sought and facilitated in all phases of the QA processes such as academic audit. This may include development of standards and the actual conduct of these QA procedures.

MoE, which was an important stakeholder in this study, suggested that commitment across borders was particularly useful for a Small State like the Maldives. This involved collaboration in QA services such as enhancing QA systems through sharing and benchmarking as well as benefits from the delivery of programs through twinning and transnational programs (Section 4.2.3.4). These findings concurred with recent international literature (Bennett et al., 2010; Madden, 2012) emphasising the usefulness of collaboration with other countries through international and regional QA networks. Also, there is considerable body of literature (Allen, 2002; Pillay & Kimber, 2009; Stella & Gnanam, 2004) that discusses the increased cross-border delivery of academic programs through twinning, partnerships or affiliation for overseas offering and other delivery modalities where HEIs collaborate with each other (Sections 2.3.2 and 2.5).

While HE QA processes such as academic audit involve assessment of internal QA of the HEIs (see Sections 2.4.2, 2.4.3.1 and 2.4.3.2), some HEI stakeholders in this study emphasised the importance of having collaboration among themselves to enhance their internal QA. International research (Kettunen, 2010) suggests that such collaboration among local HEIs can yield benefits such as cross-evaluation of their degree programs (Section 2.4.1.3), thereby strengthening the internal quality culture of those HEIs.

Figure 5.13 illustrates various collaborative arrangements discussed above. Four types of collaborative relationships emerged in this study with respect to HE QA. The first collaboration was between the QA agency and the HEIs as one of the

most important stakeholders in the delivery of HE QA services. The second type identified was collaboration between the industry bodies and both HEIs and the QA agency. The third type of collaboration was between the HEIs and the cross-border providers. The fourth type of collaboration was between HEIs themselves.

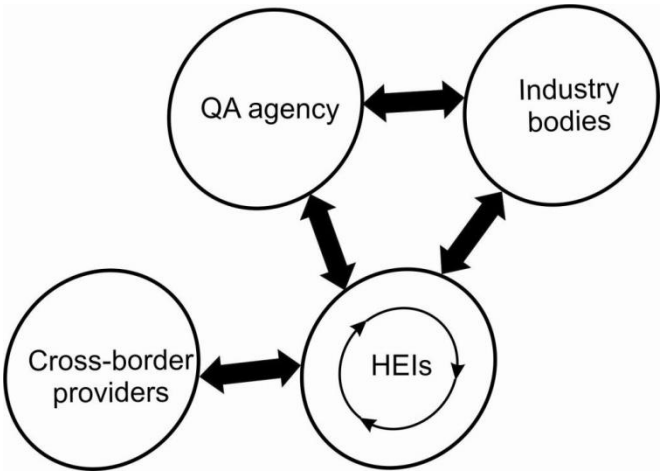

Figure 5.13. The nature of collaboration in HE QA

5.4.4 Interrelationships between the attributes of the service delivery.

The attributes of the third element Service Delivery appears to be closely interrelated. Figure 5.14 depicts the interrelationships between the attributes of the Service Delivery that emerged from the findings and the discussion.

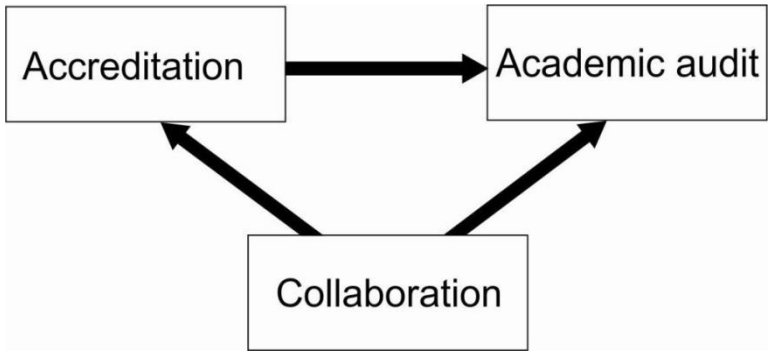

Figure 5.14. Interrelationships between the attributes of the service delivery

As in Figure 5.14, accreditation precedes academic audit. Though the findings did not indicate this was the understanding of the stakeholders, registration of the HEIs, followed by institutional accreditation that will then facilitate to academic audit is a pattern seen in some countries (Section 2.4.3.2). Kohler (2003) points out that to a large extent, initial accreditation procedures coincide with the procedural devices employed for on-going institutional audits. Therefore, both accreditation and academic audits complement each other with a continuous process of quality

assurance. In addition, the attribute collaboration has connections to accreditation and academic audit. Collaboration between the QA agency and the HEIs as well as the cross-border collaboration by and large may influence the performance of these services and the way it is implemented.

While there were interrelationships between the attributes of each of the three elements identified in this study, the connections of all three elements together with attributes form the overall higher education QA system. The contribution of the findings to a proposal for a QA model for Small States, will be discussed in Chapter Six Conclusions (Section 6.3).

Chapter 6: Conclusions

Although higher education (HE) quality assurance (QA) has been extensively studied, there has been little research the field as a holistic system particularly in the context of Small States. This study provided useful insights on what constitutes a holistic model for HE QA within the constraints of Small States. This final chapter draws conclusions around the findings, which confirms systemic characteristics of HE QA. This chapter provides a brief summary to recap the study in relation to the research questions (Section 6.1) and presents conclusions in Section 6.2 by proposing what may be a model for HE QA for Small States. In Section 6.3, implications of the findings are discussed and limitations of the study in Section 6.4. Finally, Section 6.5 offers some recommendations.

6.1 A BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE STUDY

This study was intended to provide a pragmatic yet relevant QA model for the higher education sector in Small States. In order to achieve this, the study focused on the elements and key attributes that are considered necessary in a HE QA system. These elements and attributes were identified from the literature review with a view to focus on what makes the QA system effective. They were then analysed for fit-for-purpose to suit Small States. The latter activity was achieved through the empirical part of the study. The main elements identified through the study were: (1) regulatory framework; (2) minimum quality standards; and (3) service delivery.

The research problem investigated in this study was to identify the gap in conceptual and operational understanding of QA that may exist in Small States seeking to develop their own rigorous and sustainable QA systems for the higher education sector. To investigate the problem, the main research question was: What constitutes the key elements and regulatory mechanisms of an effective QA system in higher education for Small States? To support the investigation of the main question, the following sub-questions were used:

SQ1: What are the elements and the underpinning attributes of an effective higher education QA system?

SQ2: What are the key regulatory and supporting management and governance issues of a robust higher education QA mechanism generally and, in particular, for Small States?

SQ3: What are the operational drivers and how may they affect a higher education QA system?

The review of the status of HE QA in Small States around the world, with a focus on the three main elements, indicated that there is a lack of information and no uniform guidelines for HA QA in these States (Stella, 2010). There is a lack of necessary policies to regulate HE QA in many of these countries. The limitation then had a domino effect on the other two elements: standards and service delivery (Houston & Maniku, 2005). The QA systems in Small States also suffer from a lack of resources which is endemic to many Small States (Harman, 1996).

As the literature review showed different elements in higher education quality assurance, all of which have to be viewed as a 'system', the conceptual framework for this study was based on systems theory concepts (Bertalanffy, 1968; Deming, 1994; Flood, 2010; Irving, 1999; Klir, 1991; Nichols, 2002; Pidwirny, 2006b; Walonick, 1993). This framework provided a basis on which the study could be launched with a clear focus on the systemic characteristics of HE QA (Ehlers, 2009; Gilbert, 1992) with elements, attributes and relationships consistent with the systems theory, highlighting the complementary and supportive roles of each.

The key findings were arranged under the thematic areas: regulatory framework, minimum quality standards and service delivery. Five findings of this study can be regarded as critical to a robust and respected higher education quality assurance system, especially, with respect to Small States. First, the need for legislation to guide the formulation of a regulatory framework emerged as paramount for the establishment of a HE QA system. Without proper legislation, the whole system will suffer and be ineffective. Legislation allows development of clear descriptions of the roles and responsibilities for the whole QA system (King, 2007). In the absence of the legislative arrangement, the QA agency will experience difficulty to enforce the QA system. Carefully drafted legislation can provide mechanisms for the whole QA system.

Second, the QA agency which is strong and independent was marked as a key feature of a HE QA agency (Ala-Vähälä & Saarinen, 2010; Bradley et al., 2008; Harman, 1998b; Van Vught & Westerheijden, 1994). This is more suitable to Small States than fragmented agencies (Bradley et al., 2008), given the lack of resources (Harman, 1996). Even if QA agencies in Small States are not able to get full independence, separation of its functions and functional independence from other government agencies may provide the QA agency a semi-autonomous or statuary organisation status.

Third, issues relating to the governing board of a HE QA agency have a lot of influence on the overall organisational effectiveness of the agency. These issues include equal representation of board membership and mitigation of all conflicts of interest. Whether board members are selected in their personal capacity (appointed for their personal expertise in technical/ professional areas) (ENQA, 2006) or official capacity (appointed for holding a senior position at technical/ professional bodies), representation of various stakeholders gives more credibility to the Board. On the other hand, the unique nature of Small States coupled with the issue of equal representation in the board can pave way for conflict of interest. As a consequence, the running of the board and the whole QA agency is affected (Carlson & Davidson, 1999). Therefore, it is crucial to take serious mitigating measures against conflict of interest.

Fourth, the findings indicated that a lack of clarity in minimum standards and guidelines is a major hurdle Small States like the Maldives face in their attempts to strengthen HE QA systems. This in turn has adverse effects on monitoring and implementing the delivery of QA services. Some established HE QA systems such as the Australian system have outlined areas where they need to develop standards and guidelines by identifying threshold and non-threshold standards (Higher Education Standards Panel [Australian Government], 2013). The threshold standards are critical and require complete and detailed guidelines. Currently, it appears that many of the Small States, including the Maldives where the case study was undertaken, have HE QA systems that are totally centralised around National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) (Keevy et al., 2008).

Fifth, both the case study in the Maldives and available literature on HE QA systems in Small States around the world indicate that these systems suffer from a

lack of focus on mainstream QA processes required for higher education. The complete circle of QA services starting with the registration of HEIs and moving on to accreditation of both the institution and programs for a certain period of time, then followed by periodic academic audit (Vlăsceanu et al., 2007), is rare in many systems, especially Small States. However, increasingly, that seems to be the ideal procedure for a holistic QA system for higher education.

6.2 CONCLUSIONS/ A HOLISTIC QA MODEL FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

As the research methodology for this study was qualitative (Merriam, 1998), a possible model for higher education quality assurance, which has potential to serve as a proxy for Small States, emerged from the findings of this study. This model for HE QA is based around systems theory principles (Bertalanffy, 1968; Deming, 1994; Flood, 2010; Irving, 1999; Klir, 1991; Nichols, 2002; Pidwirny, 2006b; Walonick, 1993). Figure 6.1 illustrates the possible model proposed for HE QA for Small States which incorporates the findings of this study.

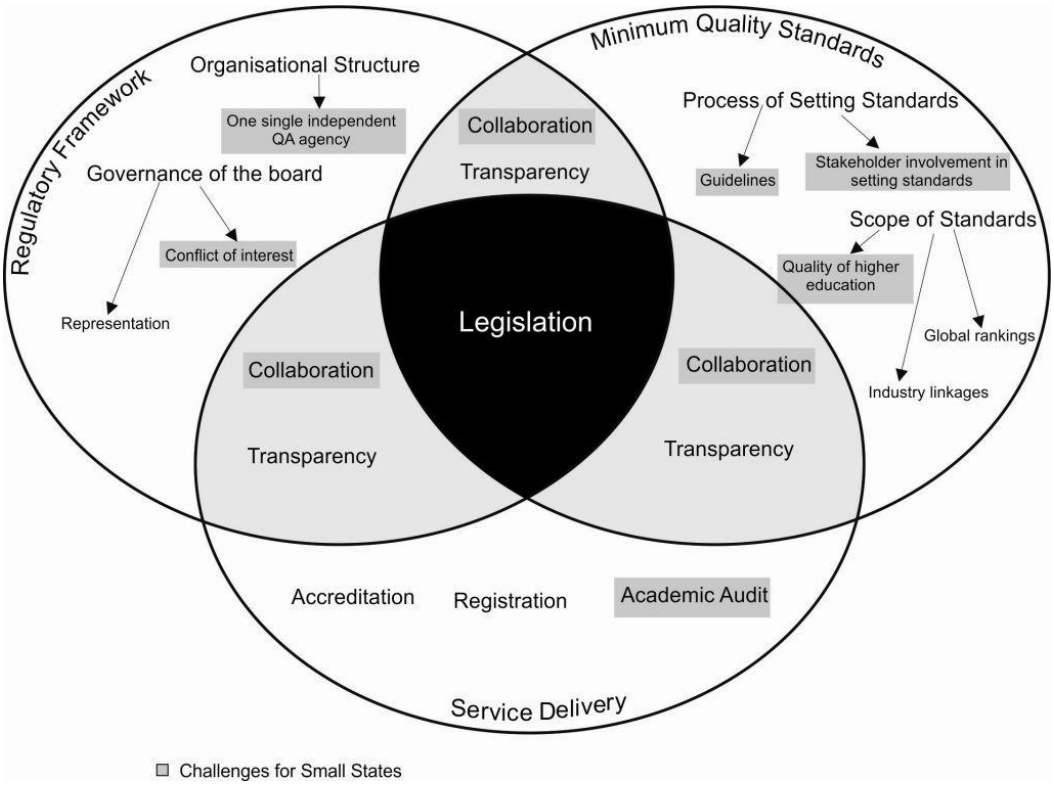

Figure 6.1. Possible model for higher education Quality assurance for Small States

Figure 6.1 provides a synthesis of Sections 5.2.4, 5.3.3 and 5.4.4 in Chapter Five *Discussions*, which focuses on systemic characteristics shown in

interrelationships between the attributes of each element. This possible model shows the systemic characteristics of all three elements identified in this study that function as a system for HE QA: regulatory framework, minimum quality standards and service delivery. The holistic nature of the HE QA systems with the inclusion of all the elements and attributes identified in this study appear in this model.

The centre of the Venn diagram (Figure 6.1) illustrates the central issue for the HE QA where legislation is placed. In conclusion, based on the findings of this study, legislation is central for the regulation of all three elements of the HE QA to function well. Many of the current issues, with regards to the introduction and implementation of an effective HE QA system, arose due to a lack of legislative framework.

The three overlapping circles in light grey in Figure 6.1 show the key issues that are located in the section where the 3 circles representing separate elements intersect. The two attributes that complement all three elements separately are transparency and collaboration. For instance, transparency is crucial for all three elements. Transparency of the regulatory framework in terms of transparency of QA decision-making and policies to relevant stakeholders will instil the trust of the stakeholders in the system. That could facilitate standards setting processes as well as implementation of QA processes through service delivery. Transparency in the process of setting standards is important to create a sense of ownership among the stakeholders, which in turn may facilitate accomplishment of service delivery such as accreditation and academic audit. On the other hand, transparency in service delivery can create awareness of QA services among public and other stakeholders. This can also make the HEIs more vigilant and careful in their delivery of higher education.

Collaboration is critical for all three elements as well as complementing the different elements. *Collaboration* as a HE QA attribute does not appear in other such studies. However, it is logical to think that Small States with minimum resources will benefit from collaborative arrangements between QA agencies and HEIs, between national HEIs themselves as well as HEIs with cross-border providers. While the legislation provides a full description of the standards-setting process as well as service delivery, this relationship between legislation and standards shows the collaboration between regulatory framework and minimum quality standards. The collaboration between minimum quality standards and service delivery is shown in

the fact that standards and guidelines pave the way to implement the QA services. Without the standards and guidelines, the QA agency would not have mechanisms to carry out QA processes such as accreditation and academic audit.

The shaded attributes pose greater challenges for Small States than other attributes. The attribute *one single independent QA agency* appears to be very critical for Small States. The findings of this study indicate that it is very difficult for Small States to make their HE QA agencies totally independent, let alone function independently. This in turn, affects the power and authority of the agency. That is why a proper legislative arrangement is vital. Another attribute of HE QA, which is challenging for Small States, is *conflict of interest of the Board members*. Conflict of interest is created due to many factors such as small population size and a lack of human resources resulting from being merely a Small State. Conflict of interest is a constant threat that undermines the running of any QA board.

The study also found that while a lack of *standards and guidelines* appears to be affecting HE QA services, it is challenging for Small States to develop these standards. That is why *the stakeholder involvement in setting standards* is proposed. Such involvement of the stakeholders was suggested to create a sense of ownership.

On the other hand, *quality of higher education* is affected because critical HE QA services such as registration, accreditation and academic audit are either not implemented or not carried out properly. Related to this issue is *academic audit* where Small States appear to be struggling, largely, due to the absence of preparatory set-up such as having minimum standards and necessary guidelines. It can be concluded from the findings of this study that, the significance of these attributes to Small States is also, partly, due to a lack of understanding of how they work in a HE QA system. This is particularly true with legislation; the importance of legislation for the overall QA system for HE is often neglected or overlooked by HE QA decision-makers. Similarly, the concept of making the structure of the QA agency a single strong agency also seems to be confused to some extent. Other attributes that appeared to be confused or misunderstood include QA board membership composition, standards-setting process, industry linkages as well as accreditation and academic audit. Therefore, it can be concluded that the system as a whole is not very well understood by relevant decision-making authorities.

6.3 LIMITATIONS

The study has provided in-depth understanding of HE QA regulation, minimum standards and services such as accreditation and academic audit. However, there were some unavoidable limitations. First, because of the nature of the Maldives as a Small State, there were only a few HEIs to choose from for data collection. To aggravate this issue, the number of well-versed individuals to choose from for interviews in those HEIs was limited, which is typical of Small States. Therefore, to gather more diverse opinions on the research questions, the research would have benefited more if this reality was a different scenario.

Second, as noted in the findings and discussions (Sections 4.2.3 and 5.4), in the Maldives, HE QA processes, such as accreditation and academic audit, are not fully implemented. As a result, the participants sometimes did not show a full understanding of the definitions of various terms as well as procedures in these processes. This was particularly true with academic audit in which the various stages, in comparison with international literature and practice in other countries, were not congruent with the stakeholders.

With regards to the issues mentioned above, future researchers in HE QA systems can gain valuable information by selecting a bigger nation where there are many HEIs. This scenario most probably will also facilitate interviews with individuals who are heavily involved in HE QA processes. Therefore, with the selection of such a location for case studies, it will provide a lot of in-depth richness to the study. Nonetheless, the selection of the Maldives as the case study location provided an opportunity to study the emerging issues and concerns from the perspective of a Small State. In general, this study is expected to provide some talking points to strengthen HE QA systems around the world and in particular, Small States.

6.4 IMPLICATIONS

This study cited the slow speed of establishing and implementing HE QA in the Maldives. This can be evidenced in the slow progress with introducing legislation for HE QA in the Maldives – as discussed in Chapters Four and Five. The slow speed is also noted by an International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) study of Small States of the Commonwealth (Stella, 2010).

This suggests that delayed action in implementing policies is typical and a constant hindrance to developing robust QA systems in Small States.

It can be concluded from the findings of this study that sluggishness such as that mentioned above is due to a number of factors. The main reason appeared to reflect the commitment and prioritisation of HE QA by the different arms of the State especially government and the parliament. While there is rhetoric of the importance of higher education for the knowledge economy as discussed in Chapter One, urgency is not evidenced. In more advanced countries such as Australia, introducing HE QA legislation is strongly supported by the commitment and understanding of the various decision-making bodies. This was displayed by the fact the Australian government commissioned a review of higher education in 2008 and one of the recommendations in the report was to create a single QA agency for the whole country. This recommendation was taken seriously by the Australian federal government and the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA) was created in 2010 by a comprehensive legislation. If such an approach was taken in Small States like the Maldives the system would not suffer from unnecessary delays. Another issue implicated in sluggishness is lack of human resources. Since this is very challenging for Small States to resolve, collaboration (Section 5.4.3) can help minimise the effects of human resources.

The case study in the Maldives indicates that there is no distinction made between standards and guidelines. Typically, in other systems, such as the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), a group of 40 European countries, there is a clear distinction between standards and guidelines (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), 2009). According to 'Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area', both standards and guidelines refer to a set of general QA principles, in which standards range from statements of narrowly defined regulatory requirements to generalised descriptions of good practice. Nevertheless, it appears that guidelines are simply guidelines that help achieve the standards. Vlăsceanu et al. (2007) refer to guidelines as criteria. In this regard, Vlăsceanu et al. (2007) define standards as a "specific result or a level of achievement that is deemed exemplary" (p.14). Therefore, the lack of distinction in the Maldives between standards and guidelines/ criteria may

affect the much needed development of standards and guidelines that drive QA processes such as accreditation and academic audit.

As discussed in the literature review (Section 2.3.3), transnational activities with regards to higher education are ever increasing. Therefore, it is a big challenge for Small States to deal with transnational providers of higher education. It is also important to note that the transnational provision of higher education is something that Small States cannot avoid, due to not having full capacity to provide quality higher education in all the disciplines required for a nation, as provided by larger countries. To address the issue of transitional providers, it is vital for Small States to have QA mechanisms to assure quality of such arrangements. This can be included in any legislation that is drafted for the QA in HE.

While this study has provided many examples from bigger and more developed countries such as Malaysia, European countries and South Africa, it is also important to acknowledge the complexity of Small States. Therefore, the systems in more developed countries may not work for Small States. However, in today's close knit global HE system, it is not entirely possible for countries to operate in isolation. This is even truer with regards to HE QA due to similarities in qualifications and higher education programs in various countries. Nevertheless, when adopting QA systems or features of QA systems from other countries, it is important to consider local factors and shape the system accordingly.

In a number of sections in this study there is reference to a lack of human resources in Small States as a major challenge. Internally and externally, HE QA agencies need a pool of experts to carry out their various QA functions and processes. Since academic audit in its stages has a procedure called expert panel visits to the intended HEIs after the submission of a self-assessment report by the HEI, HE QA agencies are constantly in need of a pool of experts. The selection of experts to the panel is an area of contention for many in Small States like the Maldives where everyone knows each other. This is due to the sensitivity of the issue where ideally the panel members should not have conflicting interests with regards to HEIs subjected to their review. However, for Small States finding people with expertise in the field of HE QA is difficult.

The findings of this study provided ideas on how to develop a higher education quality assurance model. While it is holistic in nature, it also provided insights on

separate elements such as HEIs, industry bodies and professional bodies. Therefore, this study can be helpful for HEIs trying to strengthen their internal quality assurance mechanisms. In the meantime, both industry bodies and HEIs can acknowledge the importance of industry linkages raising the quality of higher education.

The empirical data collected in this study provided a lot of information on HE QA issues typical to Small States. However, as pointed out in Chapter Four and Five, the HE QA system in the Maldives where the case study was located, was incomplete in many ways and participants were unable to provide in-depth understanding of some of the HE QA concepts. This led the researcher to draw examples from other more advanced systems in other countries such as Australia, Malaysia, South Africa, European countries, and some Small States in the Caribbean, Indian Ocean and South Pacific. On the other hand, while the secondary source of data for this study was mainly through document analysis, it was challenging to find relevant documents to corroborate interview data due to the lack of documents developed for the HE QA in the Maldives.

While trying to acknowledge international best practices with regards to HE QA, this study had to learn from experiences in some OECD countries such as Australia and European countries. This study provided a lot of insights on recent trends in legislative frameworks, standards setting, as well as HE QA processes particularly when there were not enough good examples to draw upon from Small States. It is important to note that the entirety of HE QA systems in OECD countries may not be a perfect fit for Small States. This reality further emphasises the 'fit for purpose' concept of HE QA.

It is understood, as discussed in Chapter Three, that the case study location in the Maldives, which is a Small State, can provide generalisability to other Small Sates. However, it is also important to emphasise that while this may be so, because many Small States share common characteristics, it is also possible to have differences between Small States. Yet, these differences may not necessarily be a major reason not to consider such findings in this study to strengthen HE QA systems.

6.5 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE STUDIES

The discussion in Chapter Five showed that core areas (threshold) and non-threshold which are secondary issues that require attention for any QA agency. Registration of HEIs is one area of the HE QA that falls under the 'threshold' standards and guidelines. In the case of the Maldives, it appeared that registration was a neglected area in the sense it was detached from the HE QA agency and it was treated in a simplistic manner. As seen elsewhere, there is reason to believe that registration of HEIs should be part of the HE QA processes as it is in many countries. In fact, as suggested in Chapter Five, in an ideal system, registration should precede accreditation which in turn precedes academic audit, functioning as a complete circle of the HE QA process. This is something that is perhaps not fully recognised by the Maldives QA agency. Therefore, reviewing the current registration arrangement and aligning with international practices and making it a function of the QA agency rather than the Ministry of Education, can be a first step in developing a QA system in the Maldives.

A major concern raised by the HEIs stakeholder group in this case study was the lack of necessary standards and guidelines for different levels of programs and professional courses. This appears to be adversely affecting the implementation of QA, given that there are not standards to guide the QA processes. This lack of standards for courses and program levels also impacted on the introduction of vital QA processes such as accreditation and academic audit. It seems that the policy-makers of the QA agency in the Maldives are unaware of an effective mechanism for the development of standards and guidelines. This is rather unfortunate given that international agencies such as the World Bank and AusAID have been involved in providing advice on QA for the HE sector. Figure 6.2 illustrates a mechanism for the development of standards and guidelines.

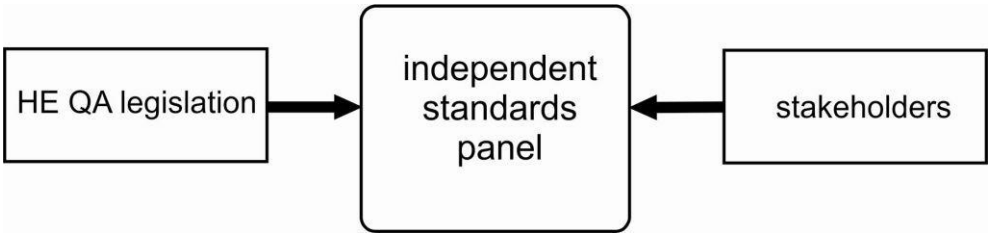

Figure 6.2. A mechanism for development of standards and guidelines

As shown in Figure 6.2, the mechanism for development of the HE QA standards and guidelines can inform the HE QA legislation which is also in the pipeline. As practised in some leading countries, the HE QA legislation should clearly describe the establishment and functions of an independent standards panel (Office of Legislative Drafting and Publishing, 2011). This panel functions with the input of relevant stakeholders. Such an arrangement would provide a much more systemic set-up for the development of HE QA standards and guidelines.

The findings of this study provided the following insights for future research in the field of higher education quality assurance. First, as HE QA emerges as a system, more research on HE QA systems is needed. As discussed in Chapter One and Two, most of the current studies on HE QA tend to focus on separate functions and do not appreciate the systems perspective central to any QA interventions. Perhaps there are lessons to be learned from other sectors such as manufacturing and particularly from the ISO which is globally recognised for its rigour. The fragmented approach unintentionally forces countries to focus on HE QA systems which often lack important aspects and a lack of realisation of the significance of the complementarity of their functions. In some countries, important attributes lack in the legislative arrangements. In other countries, it might be a lack of effective mechanism(s) to develop HE QA standards and guidelines. In some other countries the lacking attributes could be in service delivery; either accreditation or academic audit or registration of HEIs. Certainly, many issues have emerged in this study with regards to all the key elements and their attributes. Therefore, research that focuses on system characteristics in HE QA by emphasising the importance of crucial elements and attributes of HE QA and their complementarity is the way forward. This can be done by researching the elements and attributes that are required to regulate, assess and monitor higher education provision.

Second, related to systems perspective there is also a need for more research that analyses the HE QA in a holistic way; not just focusing on one or two aspects, but all QA areas noted in this study. There are two dimensions that can be explored in this regard: (1) the breadth and depth or the coverage of HE QA; (2) the elements and attributes of HE QA itself. In terms of the breadth and depth or the coverage of HE QA, most research on HE QA focuses on assuring quality of higher education at either subject level, faculty level or university level; not at a national level. This

means the focus of such research is often on strengthening the internal quality assurance of HEIs. Though there are some studies on national HE QA systems, such studies are understandably uncommon; they are complex and require large financial and human resources. On the other hand, pertinent to the elements and attributes of a HE QA system, studies that focus on a holistic approach where all the elements and attributes are equally focused are also rare. Therefore, for the people who need to learn about HE QA, and for countries such as Small States, finding comprehensive resources in the field is difficult. Addressing this issue in future studies will facilitate development and strengthen HE QA systems across the world, especially resource strained Small States.

Third, there is a need for QA agencies to train personnel and experts in the field. This study indicated that currently many HE QA agencies are in dire need of qualified human resources. However, when it comes to training, there are no formal university programs on HE QA. Currently, the only way HE QA agencies can train personnel for their agency is through ad hoc or tailor-made training programs or study visits. Regardless of this shortage in training arrangements, one thing very obvious across the world is that the importance of QA in higher education is acknowledged by almost all countries. This is displayed by creating QA agencies in almost every country. Currently, the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education has 173 HE QA agencies from 85 countries as full members (INQAAHE, 2013). This indicates that countries need professionals who are specialised in the field of HE QA to run these QA agencies and work as experts in the field. In this study, lack of human resources in the Maldives QA agency was noted. Lack of human resources was especially highlighted as a common issue for Small States (Harman, 1996; Stella, 2010).

Despite the limited pool of experts in the field of HE QA to date, it is not known if there are any university programs designed to train and educate people in this field. Therefore, it may be time to launch educational programs in the field of higher education quality assurance. Such developments will provide much needed human resources for the field and strengthen higher education quality assurance in many countries including Small States.

References

Accreditation Council of Trinad and Tobago. (n.d.). Accreditation. Retrieved from http://www.actt.org.tt/services/articlelist.aspx?CategoryID=1896

Accreditation Organisation of Netherlands and Flanders [NVAO]. (2011). Assessment frameworks of the higher education accreditation system: Institutional quality assurance assessment: Author.

Accreditation Organisation of Netherlands and Flanders [NVAO]. (2013). Assessment Process Institutional Audit. from http://nvao.com/assessment_process_institutional_audit

Afonso, A., Ramírez, J. J., & Díaz-Puente, J. M. (2012). University-Industry Cooperation in the Education Domain to Foster Competitiveness and Employment. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences, 46*(2012), 3947-3953. doi: 10.1016/j.sbspro.2012.06.177

Ala-Vähälä, T., & Saarinen, T. (2010). Building European-level quality assurance structures: Views from within ENQA. *Quality in Higher Education, 15*(2), 89-103. doi: 10.1080/13538320902995741

Allen, M. (2002). *The corportae university handbook: designing, managing and growing a successful program*. New York, NY: AMACOM.

Allgoo, K., Bradshaw, M., Wah, R., Waheed, A. H., Gertze, F. E., & Marshall, Y. (2010). *Transnational Qualifications Framework for the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth*. Vancouver, Canada: Commonwealth of Learning.

Amaral, A., & Magalhães, A. (2004). Epidemiology and the Bologna saga. *Higher Education, 48*(1), 79-100.

American Psychological Association. (2002). Principles of good practice in distance education and the application to professional education and training in psychology.

Anderson, G. (2006). Assuring auality/resisting quality assurance: Academics' responses to 'quality' in some Australian universities. *Quality in Higher Education, 12*(2), 161 - 173. doi: 10.1080/13538320600916767

Barbados Accreditation Council. (2010). Services include. Retrieved from http://www.bac.gov.bb/main.htm

Baxter, P., & Jack, S. (2008). Qualitative case study methodology: Study design and implementation for novice researchers. *The Qualitative Report, 13*(4), 544-559.

Bazeley, P. (2007). *Qualitative data nalysis with NVivo*. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications.

Bennett, P., Bergan, S., Uvalick-Trumbic, S., Cassar, D., Hamilton, M., Soinila, M., . . . Williams, P. (2010). Quality assurance in transnational higher education. Helsinki, Finland.

Berghe, W. V. D. (1997). Application of ISO 9000 standards to education and training: Interpretation and guidelines in a European perspective (1st ed.).

Brussels, Belgium: European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training.

Bernardino, P. R., & Marques, R. C. (2009). Comparison of regulatory models of higher education in Europe: the Portuguese situation. *Avaliação: Revista da Avaliação da Educação Superior (Campinas), 14*, 53-70. doi: 10.1590/S1414-40772009000100004

Bertalanffy, L. V. (1968). *General system theory*. New York, NY: Brazilier.

Bertalanffy, L. V. (1973). *General system theory: Foundations, development, applications* (Rev. ed.). New York, NY: Braziller.

Billing, D. (2004). International comparisons and trends in external quality assurance of higher education: Commonality or diversity? *Higher Education, 47*(1), 113-137. doi: 10.1023/B:HIGH.0000009804.31230.5e

Blackmur, D. (2004). Issues in higher education quality assurance. *Australian Journal of Public Administration, 63*(2), 105-116. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-8500.2004.00382.x

Blackmur, D. (2007). A critical analysis of the UNESCO/OECD Guidelines for Quality Provision of Cross-Border Higher Education. *Quality in Higher Education, 13*(2), 117-130. doi: 10.1080/13538320701629137

Blackmur, D. (2008a). A critical analysis of the INQAAHE Guidelines of Good Practice for Higher Education Quality Assurance Agencies. *Higher Education, 56*(6), 723-734. doi: 10.1007/s10734-008-9120-x

Blackmur, D. (2008b). Quis custodiet ipsos custodes? The review of the Australian Universities Quality Agency. *Quality in Higher Education, 14*(3), 249-264. doi: 10.1080/13538320802507646

Bodgdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (1992). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theory and methods*. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

Bogue, E. G. (1998). Quality assurance in higher education: The evolution of systems and design ideals. *New Directions for Institutional Research, 1998*(99), 7.

Bologna Process - European Higher Education Area. (2010). Welcome to the EHEA official website! , from http://www.ehea.info/contact.aspx

Bornmann, L., Mittag, S., & Daniel, H. D. (2006). Quality assurance in higher education: Meta-evaluation of multi-stage evaluation procedures in Germany. *Higher Education, 52*(4), 687-709. doi: 10.1007/s10734-004-8306-0

Botha, J. (2005). HEQC accreditatin policy development (2001-2004): Informed by international comparisons. In M. Smout (Ed.), *The Decade Ahead: Challenges for Quality Assurance in South African Higher Education* (pp. 59-81). Pretoria, South Africa: SAUVCA.

Bradley, D., Noonan, P., Nugent, H., & Scales, B. (2008). Review of Australian higher education: Final report (Bradley report). Canberra, ACT.

Bray, M., & Adam, K. (2001). The dialectic of the international and the national: Secondary school examinations in Maldives. *International Journal of Educational Development, 21*(3), 231-244. doi: Doi: 10.1016/s0738-0593(00)00031-6

Brennan, J., & Teichler, U. (2008). The future of higher education and of higher education research: Higher education looking forward: An introduction. *Higher Education, 56*(3), 259-264. doi: 10.1007/s10734-008-9124-6

Bridges. (1997). *Principles underlying regulatory frameworks*. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Student Assessment & Classification Working Group.

Briguglio, L. (1995). The vulnarability index and small island developing states: A review of conceptual and methodological issues. *World Development, 23*(9).

Brooks, R. L. (2005). Measuring university quality. *Review of Higher Education, 29*(1), 1-21. doi: 10.1353/rhe.2005.0061

Bubtana, A. R. (2007). *WTO/GATS: Possible implications for higher education and research in the Arab States*. Paper presented at the Presented at the Regional Seminar "The Impact of Globalization on Higher Education and Research in the Arab States", Rabat, Morocco.

Byrne, B. (2004). Qualitavive interviewing. In C. Seale (Ed.), *Researching society and culture* (2nd ed., pp. 92-179). London, UK: Sage.

Calvo-Mora, A., Leal, A., & Roldán, J. L. (2006). Using enablers of the EFQM model to manage institutions of higher education. *Quality Assurance in Education, 14*(2), 99-122. doi: 10.1108/09684880610662006

Carlson, M. S., & Davidson, A. S. (1999). After the election: How do governing boards become effective work groups? *State and Local Government Review, 31*(3), 190-201. doi: 10.1177/0160323X9903100304

Charles Stuart University. (2011). Assessment. Retrieved from http://www.csu.edu.au/distance-education/what-is-distance-education/assessment

Chauhan, C. P. S. (2008). Higher education: Current status and future possibilities in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. *Analytical Reports on International Education, 2*(1), 29-48. doi: 10.3890/arie.2.1.29

Chiang, L.-C. (2004). The relationship between university autonomy and funding in England and Taiwan. *Higher Education, 48*(2), 189-212. doi: 10.1023/B:HIGH.0000034314.77435.bf

Coates, H. (2010). Defining and monitoring academic standards in Australian higher education. *Higher Education Management and Policy, 22*(1). doi: 10.1787/hemp-v22-art2-en

Commonwealth Consultative Group. (1997). *A future for small states: Overcoming vulnarability*. London, UK: Commonwealth Secratariat.

Commonwealth of Australia. (2009). *Transforming Australia's higher education system*. Canberra, ACT: Commonwealth of Australia.

Commonwealth of Learning. (2010). VUSSC Transnational Qualifications Framework. Retrieved from http://www.vussc.info/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=123&Itemid=2

Commonwealth Secretariat. (2007). *Final statement.* Paper presented at the International Conference on Small States and Economic Resilience, Malta.

Commonwealth Secretariat. (2011). Small States. from http://www.thecommonwealth.org/Internal/180407/

Cooper, P. (2007). Knowing your 'lemons': Quality cncertainty in UK higher education. *Quality in Higher Education, 13*(1), 19-29. doi: 10.1080/13538320701272698

Cornwall, A., & Jewkes, R. (1995). What is participatory research? *Social Science & Medicine, 41*(12), 1667-1676. doi: Doi: 10.1016/0277-9536(95)00127-s

Creswell, J. W. (2003). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications.

Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications.

Creswell, J. W., & Miller, D. L. (2000). Determining Validity in Qualitative Inquiry. *Theory Into Practice, 39*(3), 124-130. doi: 10.1207/s15430421tip3903_2

Crystal, D. (1997). *English as a global language*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Cunningham, S., Ryan, Y., Stedman, L., Tapsall, S., Bagdon, K., Flew, T., & Coaldrake, P. (2000). *The business of borderless education*. Canberra, Australia: Australian Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs.

Currie, D., Krbec, D., & Higgins, J. (2005). Creating a quality assurance system for Croatian higher education. *Higher Education in Europe, 30*(1), 53-65. doi: 10.1080/03797720500088103

Cyryx College. (2010). International partners. Retrieved from http://www.cyryxcollege.edu.mv/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=18&Itemid=21

D'Este, P., & Patel, P. (2007). University–industry linkages in the UK: What are the factors underlying the variety of interactions with industry? *Research Policy, 36*(9), 1295–1313. doi: 10.1016/j.respol.2007.05.002

Daniel, J., & Kanwar, A. (2006). *Quality assurance for open, distance and eLearning: Issues for developing countries*. Paper presented at the World Bank Joint Client-Staff Learning Seminar on Quality Assurance in Tertiary Education, Sèvres, France. http://www.col.org/resources/speeches/2006presentations/Pages/2006-06-20.aspx

Daniel, J., Kanwar, A., & Clarke-Okah, W. (2006). *Quality assurance and cross border higher education in the Commonwealth: The Work of the Commonwealth of Learning* Paper presented at the Regulation of Cross-Border Higher Education: Issues and Trends New Delhi, India.

Davis, M., & Stark, A. (2001). *Conflict of interest in the professions*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Deming, W. E. (1994). *The new economics* (2nd ed ed.). Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Centre for Advanced Educational Services.

Department of Higher Education [Maldives]. (2012). Registration of higher education institutions. from

http://dhe.gov.mv/index.php/downloads/category/6-registration-of-higher-education-institutions#

Diener, E., & Crandall, R. (1978). *Ethics in social and behavioral research*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Dopfer, K., Foster, J., & Potts, J. (2004). Micro-meso-macro. *Journal of Evolutionalry Economics, 14*(3), 263-279. doi: 10.1007/s00191-004-0193-0

Education, E. A. f. Q. A. i. H., & (ENQA). (2008). Quality assurance and qualifications frameworks. In C. Cherry, N. Costes, T. Egarter, E. Helle, Teemu & Suominen (Eds.). Helsinki, Finland: European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education.

Edwards, F. (2012). The evidence for a risk-based approach to Australian higher education regulation and quality assurance. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management, 34*(3), 295-307. doi: 10.1080/1360080X.2012.678725

Ehlers, U. D. (2009). Understanding quality culture. *Quality Assurance in Education, 17*(4), 343 - 363. doi: 10.1108/09684880910992322

ENQA. (2006). Quality assurance of higher education in Portugal: An Assessment of the existing systema and recommendations for a future system. Helsinki, Finland.

Estermann, T., & Nokkala, T. (2009). *University autonomy in Europe: Exploratory study* Brussels, Belgium: European University Association.

European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). (2009). Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area. Helsinki, Finland: Author.

European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). (2010). ENQA and the Bologna Process. Retrieved from http://www.enqa.eu/bologna_overview.lasso

European Commission. (2010). The European Qualifications Framework (EQF). Retrieved from http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc44_en.htm#doc

Flick, U. (2006). *An introduction to qualitative research* (3rd ed.). London, UK: Sage Publications.

Flood, R. (2010). The relationship of 'Systems Thinking' to Action Research. *Systemic Practice and Action Research, 23*(4), 269-284. doi: 10.1007/s11213-010-9169-1

Frølich, N., Schmidt, E. K., & Rosa, M. J. (2010). Funding systems for higher education and their impacts on institutional strategies and academia: A comparative perspective. *International Journal of Education Management, 24*(1), 7-21. doi: 10.1108/09513541011013015

Gänzle, S., Meister, S., & King, C. (2009). The Bologna Process and its impact on higher education at Russia's margins: The case of Kaliningrad. *Higher Education, 57*(4), 533-547. doi: 10.1007/s10734-008-9187-4

Garvin, D. A. (1984). What does product quality really mean? *Sloan Management Revalue System, 26*, 25–43.

Gift, S., Leo-Rhynie, E., & Moniquette, J. (2006). Quality assurance of transnational education in the English-speaking Caribbean. *Quality in Higher Education, 12*(2), 125-133. doi: 10.1080/13538320600916692

Gilbert, J. (1992). *How to eat an elephant: A slice by slice guide to total qulaity management*. Merseyside, UK: Tudor Business Publishing

Gordon, G. (1999). Managing quality assurance in higher education: A Scottish example. *Higher Education in Europe, 24*(2), 295. doi: 10.1080/0379772990240218

Guba, E., & Lincoln, Y. (1989). *Fourth generation evaluation*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Guba, E., & Lincoln, Y. (2001). Guidelines and checklist for constructivist (a.k.a. fourth generation) evaluation. Retrieved from http://www.wmich.edu/evalctr/archive_checklists/constructivisteval.pdf

Guberman, S. (2002). *Reflections on Ludwig von Bertalanfy's "General System Theory: Foundations, development, applications"*. Paper presented at the Proceedings of the 5th European Systems Science Congress, , Crete, October 2002.

Gulbrandsen, M., & Smeby, J.-C. (2005). Industry funding and university professors' research performance. *Research Policy, 34*(6), 932-950. doi: 10.1016/j.respol.2005.05.004

Guri-Rosenblit, S. (2005). 'Distance education' and 'e-Learning': Not the same thing. *Higher Education, 49*(4), 467-493. doi: 10.1007/s10734-004-0040-0

Gürüz, K. (2008). *Higher education and international student mobility in the global knowledge* Albany, NY: State University of New York.

Gvaramadze, I. (2008). From quality assurance to quality enhancement in the European Higher Education Area. *European Journal of Education, 43*(4), 443-455. doi: 10.1111/j.1465-3435.2008.00376.x

Haakstad, J. (2001). Accreditation: The new quality assurance formula? Some reflections as Norway is about to reform its quality assurance system. *Quality in Higher Education, 7*(1), 77-82. doi: 10.1080/13538320120045102

Hakim, C. (1987). *Research design: Strategies and chices in the design of social research*. London, UK: Routledge.

Hammersley, M., & Gomm, R. (1997). Bias in social research. *Sociological Research Online, 2*(1). doi: 10.5153/sro.55

Harman, G. (1994). Australian higher education administration and the quality assurance movement *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management, 16*(1), 25 - 43 doi: 10.1080/1036970940160103

Harman, G. (1996). *Quality assurance for higher education: Developing and managing quality assurance for higher education systems and institutions in Asia and the Pacific*. Bangkok, Thailand: UNESCO Principal Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific.

Harman, G. (1998a). The Management of Quality Assurance: A Review of International Practice. *Higher Education Quarterly, 52*(4), 345-364. doi: 10.1111/1468-2273.00104

Harman, G. (1998b). Quality assurance mechanisms and their use as policy instruments: Major international approaches. *European Journal of Education, 33*(3), 331-348.

Harris, R. (1997). Evaluating Internet Research Sources. from http://radnortsd.schoolwires.com/cms/lib/PA01000218/Centricity/ModuleInstance/2137/Evaluating_Internet_Research_Sources.pdf

Harvey, L. (2008). Rankings of higher education Institutions: A critical review. *Quality in Higher Education, 14*(3), 187-207. doi: 10.1080/13538320802507711

Harvey, L., & Green, D. (1993). Defining quality. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*(18), 9–34. doi: 10.1080/0260293930180102

Harvey, L., & Williams, J. (2010). Fifteen years of quality in higher education. *Quality in Higher Education, 16*(1), 3-36. doi: 10.1080/13538321003679457

Healey, N. M. (2008). Is higher education is really 'internationalising'? *Higher Education, 55*(3), 333-355. doi: 10.1007/s10734-007-9058-4

Henry, G. T. (2009). Practical sampling. In L. Bickerman & D. J. Rog (Eds.), *The Sage handbok of applied social reserch methods*. Thousnad Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Higher Education Standards Panel [Australian Government]. (2013). Background to the Higher Education Standards Framework. from http://www.hestandards.gov.au/higher-education-standards-framework

Hodson, P., & Thomas, H. (2003). Quality assurance in Higher Education: Fit for the new millenium or simply year 2000 compliant? *Higher Education, 45*(3), 375.

Hoecht, A. (2006). Quality assurance in UK higher education: Issues of trust, control, professional autonomy and accountability. *Higher Education, 51*(4), 541-563. doi: 10.1007/s10734-004-2533-2

Houston, D. (2010). Achievements and Consequences of Two Decades of Quality Assurance in Higher Education: A Personal View From the Edge. *Quality in Higher Education, 16*(2), 177-180. doi: 10.1080/13538322.2010.485730

Houston, D., & Maniku, A. A. (2005). Systems perspectives on external quality assurance: Implications for micro states. *Quality in Higher Education, 11*(3), 213-226. doi: 10.1080/13538320500329806

INQAAHE. (2013). Full members. from http://www.inqaahe.org/members/list-full.php

International Bureau of Education. (2011). World data on education 2010/11. Available from IBE, UNESCO World Data on Education, from Author http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0021/002113/211307e.pdf

International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE). (2009). INQAAHE Good Practice Guidelines in Quality Assurance. Retrieved from http://www.inqaahe.org/admin/files/assets/subsites/1/documenten/1231430767_inqaahe---guidelines-of-good-practice[1].pdf

International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE). (2010). What can INQAAHE do for you? Retrieved from http://www.inqaahe.org/main/about-inqaahe-1/what-can-inqaahe-do-for-you

International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education. (2011). The role of the network. Retrieved from http://www.inqaahe.org/main/about-inqaahe

Irving, A. (1999). Systems Theory. Retrieved from http://www.bechervaise.com/DBAR7.htm

Jackson, N. (1998). Understanding standards-based quality assurance: Part I - rationale and conceptual basis. *Quality Assurance in Education, 6*(3), 132 - 140. doi: 10.1108/09684889810224911

Jeliazkova, M., & Westerheijden, D. F. (2001). *A next generation of quality assurance models: On phases, levels and circles in policy development*. Paper presented at the CHER 14th Annual Conference 'Higher education and its clients: institutional responses to changes in demand and in environment', Dijon, France. http://doc.utwente.nl/56078/

Jeliazkova, M., & Westerheijden, D. F. (2002). Systemic adaptation to a changing environment: Towards a next generation of quality assurance models. *Higher Education, 44*(3), 433-448. doi: 10.1023/a:1019834105675

Jones, G. W. (2002). The search for local accountability. In S. Leach (Ed.), *Strengthening local government in the 1990s* (pp. 49-78). London, UK: Longman.

Karapetrovic, S., & Willborn, W. (2000). Quality assurance and effectiveness of audit systems. *The International Journal of Quality & Reliability Management, 17*(6), 679 - 703. doi: 10.1108/02656710010315256

Keevy, J., West, P., Schmidt, A., Hope, A., Lene, P., & Manabile, E. (2008). Transnational Qualifications Framework for the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth: Concept document. Vancouver, Canada: Commonwealth of Learning (COL), South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA).

Kettunen, J. (2010). Cross-evaluation of degree programmes in higher education. *Quality Assurance in Education, 18*(1), 34-46. doi: 10.1108/09684881011015981

Key, J. P. (1997). Research design in occupational education. Retrieved from http://www.okstate.edu/ag/agedcm4h/academic/aged5980a/5980/newpage21.htm

King, R. P. (2007). Governance and accountability in the higher education regulatory state. *Higher Education, 53*(4), 411-430. doi: 10.1007/s10734-005-3128-2

Klir, G. (1991). *Facts of systems science*. New York, NY: Plenum.

Knight, J. (2006). *Higher education crossing borders*. Paris, France: COL-UNESCO.

Kohler, J. (2003). Quality assurance, accreditation, and recognition of qualifications as regulatory mechanisms in the European Higher Education Area. *Higher Education in Europe, 28*(3), 317. doi: 10.1080/0379772032000119973

Kristensen, B. (2010). Has external quality assurance actually improved quality in higher education over the course of 20 years of the 'quality revolution'? *Quality in Higher Education, 16*(2), 153-157. doi: 10.1080/13538322.2010.485732

Kristoffersen, D., & Lindeberg, T. (2004). Creating quality assurance and international transparency for quality assurance agencies: The case of mutual

recognition. *Quality in Higher Education, 10*(1), 31-36. doi: 10.1080/1353832242000195914

Langfeldt, L., Stensaker, B., Harvey, L., Huisman, J., & Westerheijden, D. (2010). The role of peer review in Norwegian quality assurance: Potential consequences for excellence and diversity. *Higher Education, 59*(4), 391-405. doi: 10.1007/s10734-009-9255-4

Latheef, M. (1998). *Higher education in the twenty-first century vision and action: Maldives*. Paper presented at the World Conference on Higher Education, Paris.

Laugharne, M. (2002). Benchmarking academic standards. *Quality Assurance in Education, 10*(3), 134 - 138. doi: 10.1108/09684880210435903

Laurillard, D. (2008). Open teaching: The key to sustainable and effective open education. In T. Liyoshi & M. S. V. Kumar (Eds.), *Opening up education: the collective advancement of education through open technology, open content, and open knowledge* (pp. 319-335). Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Law, D. C. S. (2010). Quality assurance in post-secondary education: Some common approaches. *Quality Assurance in Education, 18*(1), 64 - 77. doi: 10.1108/09684881011016007

Lewis, R. (2009). Quality assurance in higher education – its global future *Higher Education to 2030* (Vol. 2: Globalisation, pp. 323-352). Paris: OECD Publishing.

Lim, D. (2001). *Quality assurance in higher education: A sudy of developing countries*. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate.

Luckett, K. (2007). The introduction of external quality assurance in South African higher education: An analysis of stakeholder response. *Quality in Higher Education, 13*(2), 97-116. doi: 10.1080/13538320701629129

Madden, L. M. (2012). *Exploring higher education regionalisation through a study of the Asia Pacific Quality Network.* (PhD), University of Toronto.

Maldives Monetary Authority. (2010). Overview of the Maldivian economy. Retrieved from http://www.mma.gov.mv/stat.php

Maldives Qualifications Authority. (2010a). Approved local courses. Retrieved from http://mqa.gov.mv/local.html

Maldives Qualifications Authority. (2010b). The Maldives National Qualifications Framework (MNQF). Male', Maldives: Author.

Maldives Qualifications Authority. (2010c). The Maldives Qualifications Authority has approved a strengthened National Qualifications Framework. Retrieved from http://mqa.gov.mv/news.html

Maldives Qualifications Authority. (2010d). Welcome to Maldives Qualifications Authority website. Retrieved from http://mqa.gov.mv/index.php

Maldives Qualifications Authority. (2011). The Format and Guidelines for Preparing Course Approval Document. Male', Maldives: Author.

Maldives: Country report. (2009). Paper presented at the UNESCO South, South-West and Central Asia Sub-regional Preparatory Conference for 2009 World Conference on Higher Education "Facing Global and Local Challenges: The New Dynamics for Higher Education", New Delhi, India.

Mandhu College. (2009). About us. Retrieved from http://www.mandhu.com/aboutus.html

Manyaga, T. (2008). Standards to assure quality in tertiary education: The case of Tanzania. *Quality Assurance in Education, 16*(2), 164 - 180. doi: 10.1108/09684880810868448

Marginson, S., & Wende, M. v. d. (2009). Europeanisation, international rankings and faculty mobility: Three cases in higher education globalisation *Higher Education to 2030: Globalisation* (Vol. 2: Globalisation, pp. 109-144). Paris: OECD Publishing.

Martin, M., & Stella, A. (2007). *Understanding and assessing quality*. Paris: International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP).

Materu, P. (2007). Higher education quality assurance in Sub-Saharan Africa: Statatus, challenges, opportunities, and promising practices. Washington, D.C.: The World Bank.

McBurnie, G., & Ziguras, C. (2001). The regulation of transnational higher education in Southeast Asia: Case studies of Hong Kong, Malaysia and Australia. *Higher Education, 42*(1), 85-105. doi: 10.1023/A:1017572119543

Mehra, B. (2002). Bias in qualitative research: Voices from an online classroom. *The Qualitative Report, 7*(1).

Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Ministry of Education. (2011). National university of Maldives inaugrated today. Retrieved from http://moe.gov.mv/v3/moe/en/?p=details&node=1986

Ministry of Planning and National Development. (2007). *Seventh national development Plan 2006 - 2010: Creating new opportunities*. Male', Maldives: Author.

Ministry of Planning and National Development. (2008). Analytical report 2006: population and housing census 2006. Retrieved from http://planning.gov.mv/en/images/stories/publications/analysiscd/index.html#

Mohamedbhai, G. (2006). *Quality assurance in tertiary education in Mauritius*. Paper presented at the Seminar on 'Quality Assurance in Tertiary Education'.

Morey, A. I. (2004). Globalization and the emergence of for-profit higher education. *Higher Education, 48*(1), 131-150. doi: 10.1023/B:HIGH.0000033768.76084.a0

Myers, M. D., & Newman, M. (2007). The qualitative interview in IS research: Examining the craft. *Information and Organization, 17*(1), 2-26. doi: 10.1016/j.infoandorg.2006.11.001

Nadvi, K., & Waltring, F. (2004). Making sense of global standards. In H. Schmitz (Ed.), *Local enterprises in the global economy: issues of governance and upgrading*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited.

Naidoo, R. (2008). Higher education: A powerhouse for development in a neo-liberal age. In D. Epstein, R. Roden, R. Deem, F. Rizvi & S. Wright (Eds.), *World Yearbook of education 2008: Geographies of knowledge, geometries of power: Framing the future of Higher Education* (pp. 248-265). New York, NY: Routledge.

New Zealand Qualifications Authority. (2012). Legislation. from http://www.nzqa.govt.nz/about-us/our-role/legislation/

New Zealand Qualifications Authority. (2013). Registration of a new provider. from http://www.nzqa.govt.nz/providers-partners/registration-and-accreditation/registration-of-a-new-provider/

Newton, J. (2004). International developments in quality assurance and quality enhancement: Challenges and opportunities. *Quality in Higher Education, 10*(2), 75-76. doi: 10.1080/1353832042000230563

Nichols, M. (2002). *Development of a quality assurance system for elearning projects.* Paper presented at the ASCILITE 2002.

Nilsson, K., & Wahlen, S. (2000). Institutional response to the Swedish model of quality assurance. *Quality in Higher Education, 6*(1), 7-18. doi: 10.1080/13538320050001036

Office of Legislative Drafting and Publishing, A.-G. s. D., Canberra,. (2011). *Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (Consequential Amendments and Transitional Provisions) Act 2011*. ComLaw, Australian Government Retrieved from http://www.comlaw.gov.au/Details/C2011C00582.

Onsman, A. (2010). Dismantling the perceived barriers to the implementation of national higher education accreditation guidelines in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management, 32*(5), 511 - 519. doi: 10.1080/1360080X.2010.511123

Onwuegbuzie, A., & Leech, N. (2007). Validity and qualitative research: An Oxymoron? *Quality & Quantity, 41*(2), 233-249. doi: 10.1007/s11135-006-9000-3

Orb, A., Eisenhauer, L., & Wynaden, D. (2000). Ethics in qualitative research. *Journal of Nursing Scholarship, 1*(33), 93-96. doi: 10.1111/j.1547-5069.2001.00093.x

Parliament of Malaysia. (2007). *Malaysian Qualifications Agency Bill 2007*. Author Retrieved from http://www.parlimen.gov.my/files/billindex/pdf/2007/DR%20242007E.pdf.

Parliament of the Republic of South Africa. (2008). *National Qualifications Framework Act 67 of 2008*. South African Qualifications Agency Retrieved from http://web.up.ac.za/sitefiles/file/1/National%20Qualifications%20Framework%20Act%2067%20of%202008,%20as%20amended%20in%202010.PDF.

Permanent Mission of the Republic of Maldives to the United Nations Office at Geneva. (2006). Fact sheets: Unique challenges, impressive achievements. from http://www.maldivesmission.ch/fileadmin/Pdf/Development/Achievements_Challenges.pdf

Pidwirny, M. (2006a). Definitions of systems and models". *Fundamentals of Physical Geography. 2nd Edition*. Retrieved from http://www.physicalgeography.net/fundamentals/4b.html

Pidwirny, M. (2006b). "Humans and their models". *Fundamentals of Physical Geography.* 2nd Edition. Retrieved from http://www.physicalgeography.net/fundamentals/4a.html

Pillay, H., & Kimber, M. (2009). Quality assurance in higher education: For whom and of what? *Int. J. Management in Education, 3*, .270–281. doi: 10.1504/IJMIE.2009.027349

President's Office [Maldives]. (2010). *MQA mandate*. Maldives Qualifications Authority. .

Rhoades, G., & Sporn, B. (2002). Quality assurance in Europe and the U.S.: Professional and political economic framing of higher education policy. *Higher Education, 43*(3), 355-390.

Richards, L. (1999). *Using NVivo in qualitative research* London, UK: Sage Publications.

Romo de la Rosa, A. (2007). Institutional autonomy and academic freedom: A perspective from the American continent. *Higher Education Policy, 20*(2007), 275-288. doi: 10.1057/palgrave.hep.8300160

Rovai, A. P., & Downey, J. R. (2010). Why some distance education programs fail while others succeed in a global environment. *The Internet and Higher Education, 13*(3), 141-147. doi: DOI: 10.1016/j.iheduc.2009.07.001

Sadler, D. R. (1987). Specifying and promulgating achievement standards. *Oxford Review of Education, 13*(2), 191-209. doi: 10.1080/0305498870130207

Samoa Qualifications Authority. (2011). The quality assurance policies. Samoa: Samoa Qualifications Authority.

Schmidt, B., Hippel, A. V., & Tippelt, R. (2010). Higher education evaluation in germany. *Research in Comparative and International Education, 5*(1), 98-111.

Schofer, E., & Meyer, J. W. (2005). The world-wide expansion of higher education in the twentieth century. *American Sociological Review, 70*(December), 898–920. doi: 10.1177/000312240507000602

Seychelles Qualifications Authority. (2008). Quality assurance. Retrieved from http://www.sqa.sc/pages/Quality%20Assurance/Default.aspx

Shah, M., Lewis, I., & Fitzgerald, R. (2011). The renewal of quality assurance in Australian higher education: the challenge of balancing academic rigour,equity and quality outcomes. *Quality in Higher Education, 17*(3), 265-278. doi: 10.1080/13538322.2011.614474

Silverman, D. (2006). *Interpreting qualitative data* (3rd ed.). London, UK: Sage Publication.

Simons, H. (2009). *Case study research in practice*. London, UK: Sage Publications.

Skolnik, M. L. (2010). Quality assurance in higher education as a political process. *Higher Education Management and Policy, 22*(1). doi: 10.1787/hemp-22-5kmlh5gs3zr0

Skyttner, L. (2001). *General systems theory ideas & applications*. London, UK World Scientific.

Smith, W. J., & Ngoma-Maema, W. Y. (2003). Education for all in South Africa: Developing a national system for quality assurance. *Comparative Education, 39*(3), 345. doi: 10.1080/0305006032000134418

South African Qualifications Authority. (2000). The national qualifications framework and quality assurance Pretoria, South Africa.

South African Qualifications Authority. (2012). Legislation. from http://www.saqa.org.za/show.asp?id=2701

Soy, S. K. (1997). *The case study as a research method*. paper. University of Texas at Austin. Retrieved from http://www.ischool.utexas.edu/~ssoy/usesusers/l391d1b.htm

Special Programme on the Least Developed Countries and Land-locked and Island Developed Countries of UNCTAD. (2003). *Vulnerability profile of Maldives*. Paper presented at the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development.

Stake, R. (1995). *The art of case research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Stanley, E. C., & Patrick, W. J. (1998). Quality assurance in American and British higher education: A comparison. *New Directions for Institutional Research, 1998*(99), 39. doi: 10.1002/ir.9904

Stella, A. (2004). External quality assurance in Indian higher education: Developments of a decade. *Quality in Higher Education, 10*(2), 115-127. doi: 10.1080/1353832042000230608

Stella, A. (2006). Quality assurance of cross-border higher education. *Quality in Higher Education, 12*(3), 257-276. doi: 10.1080/13538320601072859

Stella, A. (2010). INQAAHE project on Small States: Situational analysis on quality assurance in Small States

Melbourne, VIC: INQAAHE.

Stella, A., & Gnanam, A. (2004). Quality assurance in distance education: The challenges to be addressed. *Higher Education, 47*(2), 143-160.

Stensaker, B. (2008). Outcomes of quality assurance: A discussion of knowledge, methodology and validity. *Quality in Higher Education, 14*(1), 3-13. doi: 10.1080/13538320802011532

Stensaker, B., & Harvey, L. (2011). *Understandings and challenges*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Stephenson, S. L. (2004). Saving quality from quality assurance. *Perspectives: Policy & Practice in Higher Education, 8*(3), 62-67. doi: 10.1080/1360310041000167668 7

Strydom, A. H., & Strydom, J. F. (2004). Establishing quality assurance in the South African context. *Quality in Higher Education, 10*(2), 101-113. doi: 10.1080/1353832042000230590

Swail, W. S., & Kampits, E. (2001). Distance education and accreditation. *New Directions for Higher Education, 2001*(113), 35-48. doi: 10.1002/he.3.abs

Technical and Vocational Education Training Division. (2010). TVET Division. Retrieved from http://www.tvet.gov.mv/index.php?id=t#bottom

Teichler, U. (2008). Diversification? Trends and explanations of the shape and size of higher education. *Higher Education, 56*(3), 349-379. doi: 10.1007/s10734-008-9122-8

Teixeira, P. (2009). Mass higher education and private institutions *Higher Education to 2030: Globalisation* (Vol. 2: Globalisation, pp. 231-258). Paris: OECD Publishing.

Tellis, W. (1997). Application of a case study methodology. *The Qualitative Report, 3*(3).

Tertiary Education Commission [Mauritius]. (2010). Guidelines for self-assessment of academci audit. Mauritius: Author.

Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency. (2012). Initial registration. from http://www.teqsa.gov.au/for-providers/registration/initial-registration

Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency [Australian Government]. (2013). Quality assessments. from http://www.teqsa.gov.au/for-providers/quality-assessments

Thaiindian News. (2010). IGNOU world's largest university: UNESCO. Retrieved from http://www.thaindian.com/newsportal/uncategorized/ignou-worlds-largest-university-unesco_100305342.html

The World Bank. (2012). Human capital for a knowledge society: Higher Education in the Maldives: An evolving seascape. Washington DC: The World Bank.

TVET Maldives. (2013). Competency standards. from http://www.tvet.gov.mv/cs_home.php

UNESCO. (2003). What is a convention?. Retrieved from http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=22124&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

UNESCO. (2005). Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education. Retrieved from http://www.unesco.org/education/guidelines_E.indd.pdf

United Nations. (1994). Report of the global conference on the sustainable development of Small Island Developing States *Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States*. Bridgetown, Barbados.

United Nations Environment Programme. (2005). Maldives post-tsunami environmental assessment: Author.

United Nations Environment Programme. (2009). National sustainable development strategy: Maldives: United Nations Environment Programme.

University Council of Jamaica. (2011). Accreditation of tertiary institutions. Retrieved from http://www.ucj.org.jm/content/what-accreditation-0

University of Dar Es Salaam. (2010). UDSM five-rear rolling strategic plan 2010/2011–2014/2015. from http://www2.aau.org/aucc/docs/udsm_strategic_plan.pdf

University of Phoenix. (2010). Accreditations and licensures. Retrieved from http://www.phoenix.edu/about_us/accreditation.html

University of the South Pacific. (2011). School of Marine Studies. Retrieved from http://www.usp.ac.fj/index.php?id=4248/

University of Twente. (2013). Systems theory. from http://www.utwente.nl/cw/theorieenoverzicht/Theory%20clusters/Communication%20Processes/System_Theory.doc/

University of Washington. (2010). Systems Theory. Retrieved from http://silvae.cfr.washington.edu/ecosystem-management/Systems.html

Van Damme, D. (2000). Internationalization and quality assurance: Towards worldwide accreditation? *European Journal for Education Law and Policy, 4*(1), 1-20. doi: 10.1023/a:1009994906190

Van Damme, D. (2001). Quality issues in the internationalisation of higher education. *Higher Education, 41*(4), 415-441. doi: 10.1023/A:1017598422297

Van Kemenade, E., Pupius, M., & Hardjono, T. W. (2008). More value to defining quality. *Quality in Higher Education, 14*(2), 175-185. doi: 10.1080/13538320802278461

Van Vught, F. A., & Westerheijden, D. F. (1994). Towards a general model of quality assessment in higher education. *Higher Education, 28*(3), 355-371. doi: 10.1007/bf01383722

Vanuatu National Training Council. (2004). Vanuatu quality training standards: Author.

Varghese, N. V. (2004). *Institutional restructuring in higher education in Asia: Trends and patterns*. Paper presented at the Policy Forum on Institutional Restructuring in Higher Education in Asia, Hue City, Vietnam.

Varghese, N. V. (2007). *GATS and higher education: The need for regulatory pplicies*. Paris, France: International Institute for Educational Planning.

Veiga, A., & Amaral, A. (2009). Survey on the implementation of the Bologna Process in Portugal. *Higher Education, 57*(1), 57-69. doi: 10.1007/s10734-008-9132-6

Vidovich, L. (2002). Quality assurance in Australian higher education: Globalisation and 'steering at a distance'. *Higher Education, 43*(3), 391. doi: 10.1023/A:1014616110418

Villa College. (2010a). Faculties and departments. Retrieved from http://villacollege.edu.mv/v1/faculties_and_departments.html

Villa College. (2010b). Introduction to Villa College. Retrieved from http://villacollege.edu.mv/v1/about_us.html

Vincent-Lancrin, S. (2009). Finance and provision in higher education: A shift from public to private? *Higher Education to 2030: Globalisation* (Vol. 2: Globalisation, pp. 259-282). Paris, France: OECD Publishing.

Vlăsceanu, L., Grünberg, L., & Pârlea, D. (2007). *Quality assurance and accreditation: A glossary of basic terms and definitions*. Bucharest, Hungary: UNESCO-CEPES.

Vroeijenstijn, A. I. (1995). *Improvement and accountability: Navigating between Scylla and Charybdis*. London, UK: Jessica Kingsley.

Waheed, A. H. (2005). *Country Report: Maldives*. Paper presented at the Competence Building in APACC Accreditation, Manila. http://www.apacc4hrd.org/conf_workshop/apacc05/CR

Walklin, L. (1992). *Putting quality into practice*. London, UK: Stanley Thornes Ltd.

Walonick, D. S. (1993). General Systems Theory. from http://www.survey-software-solutions.com/walonick/systems-theory.htm

Wells, P. J., Sadlak, J., & Vlăsceanu, L. (Eds.). (2007). *The rising role and relevance of private higher education in Europe*. Bucharest, Hungary: UNESCO-CEPES.

Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education. (2008). Quality assurance in distance education: Policy options and status of the states . Retrieved from http://www.wiche.edu/Policy/PolicyInsights/Distance%20Education/pol2opt.htm

Williams, J., & Cappuccini-Ansfield, G. (2007). Finess for purpose? National and institutional approaches to publishing the student voice. *Quality in Higher Education, 13*(2), 159-172. doi: 10.1080/13538320701629186

Williams, P. (2002). Define 'quality', then we'll talk 'assurance'. *Times Higher Education Supplement*(1520), 14.

Williams, R., & Dyke, N. V. (2007). Measuring the international standing of universities with an application to Australian universities. *Higher Education, 53*(6), 819-841. doi: 10.1007/s10734-005-7516-4

Wolf, R. A. (1993). The accreditation of higher education institutions in the United States. *Higher Education in Europe, 18*(3), 91-99. doi: 10.1080/0379772930180311

Woodhouse, D. (2004). The quality of quality assurance agencies. *Quality in Higher Education, 10*(2), 77-87. doi: 10.1080/1353832042000230572

Woodhouse, D. (2006). *Quality = Fitness for Purpose (FFP): Definition for all seasons*. Paper presented at the APQN Conference on Cooperation in Quality Assurance, Shanghai.

Woodhouse, D. (2010). Internationalisation of quality assurance: The role played by the networks. Retrieved from http://www.auqa.edu.au/files/presentations/internationalisation_of_qa___the_role_played_by_the_networks.pdf

World Bank, & Commonwealth Secretariat. (2000). Small states: Meeting challenges in the global economy. Washington, D.C.

Yin, R. K. (1998). The abridged version of case study research. In L. Bickman & D. Rog (Eds.), *Handbook of applied social research methods* (pp. 229-259). London, UK: Sage.

Yin, R. K. (2003). *Applications of case study research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Yin, R. K. (2009a). *Case study research: Design and methods* (4th ed. Vol. 5). Los Angles,CA: Sage.

Yin, R. K. (2009b). How to do better case studies. In L. Bickman & D. J. Rog (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of applied social research methods*. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE.

Yorke, M. (1999). Assuring quality and standards in globalised higher education. *Quality Assurance in Education, 7*(1), 14 - 24. doi: 10.1108/09684889910252496

Appendices

Appendix A
Semi-structured Interview with MoE, Maldives

Table A.1

Interview questions used in the interview with the MoE officials

	Questions	Q type	Element
1	Current literature on HE QA, support the argument that a single one-tier system is the way forward. What is your opinion?	General	Legislative framework
2	How important do you think are the documents for transparency and operational independence in a HE QA agency? What documents do you think are necessary or important for this?	General	Standards
3	While accreditation (quality control) and academic audit (quality improvement) are regarded as major processes of quality assurance, which of these two do you think is more important for Maldives as a Small State?	General	Service delivery
4	What are the underlying principles for the Maldives quality assurance system in higher education?	Specific	Legislative framework
5	Can you elaborate on the national policy for the higher education quality assurance system in the Maldives?	Specific	Legislative framework
6	What is the national legislative arrangement for the national QA body (Maldives Qualifications Authority)?	Specific	Legislative framework
7	In some bigger countries like Australia there is a national drive to establish "a strong single national body for quality assurance in higher education. How important for the Maldives, as a small state to have a powerful single national body for quality assurance in higher education?	Specific	Legislative framework
8	What are the most influential outside factors for Maldives quality assurance system in higher education?	Specific	Legislative framework/ Service delivery
9	What is the effect of internationalisation of higher education on the higher education quality assurance system in the Maldives?	Specific	Legislative framework
10	What is your national focus on the issues resulting from cross-border higher education and online and distance education?	Specific	Legislative framework

11	What is your opinion on a regional collaborative arrangement for higher education, especially for Small States?	Specific	Service delivery

Appendix B
Semi-structured Interview with MQA, Maldives

Table B.1

Interview questions used in the interview with MQA officials

	Questions	Q type	Element
1	Current literature on HE QA, support the argument that a single one-tier system is the way forward. What is your opinion?	General	Legislative framework
2	How important do you think are the documents for transparency and operational independence in a HE QA agency? What documents do you think are necessary or important for this?	General	Standards
3	While accreditation (quality control) and academic audit (quality improvement) are regarded as major processes of quality assurance, which of these two do you think is more important for Maldives as a Small State?	General	Service delivery
4	What are the procedures in place for MQA's own accountability? In your view, what is required to improve?	Specific	Service delivery
5	What is the best regulatory option for the Maldives national quality assurance system in higher education as a small state?	Specific	Legislative framework
6	What are the key governance and management issues for the MQA?	Specific	Legislative framework
7	What procedural documents, standards, criteria and guidelines are in place?	Specific	Standards
8	What regional and international arrangements that MQA is part of?	Specific	Service delivery
9	How independent is MQA from the ministry and higher education institutions?	Specific	Legislative framework
10	What is the best and most suitable quality assurance model for Maldives as a Small State?	Specific	Service delivery
11	Can you explain the accreditation and audit procedures in place at MQA?	Specific	Service delivery

Appendix C
Semi-structured Interview with Higher Education Institutions of the Maldives

Table C.1

Interview questions used in the interview with key figures of the higher education institutions

	Questions	Q type	Element
1	Current literature on HE QA, support the argument that a single one-tier system is the way forward. What is your opinion?	General	Legislative framework
2	How important do you think are the documents for transparency and operational independence in a HE QA agency? What documents do you think are necessary or important for this?	General	Standards
3	While accreditation (quality control) and academic audit (quality improvement) are regarded as major processes of quality assurance, which of these two do you think is more important for Maldives as a Small State?	General	Service delivery
4	Do you focus on research or teaching or both and Why?	Specific	Service delivery
5	Do you intend to compete against other universities? If so against who? What would u focus most to improve? Teaching? Research? Local research issues?	Specific	Service delivery
6	What do you think of global rankings?	Specific	Standards
7	What improvements have you noticed after the name change of MAB to MQA?	Specific	Legislative framework
8	What role MQA can play in establishing and maintaining internal quality assurance mechanisms or arrangements in your institution?	Specific	Service delivery
9	How important do you think is to have a single strong national agency for quality assurance in higher education for the Maldives?	Specific	Legislative framework
10	What internal quality assurance arrangements are in place in your institution?	Specific	Service delivery
11	What is your opinion about the current arrangements and procedures of accreditation and institutional audit?	Specific	Service delivery

Appendix D
Semi-structured Interview with Industry Associations of the Maldives

Table D.1

Interview questions used in the interview with key figures of the industry associations

	Questions	Q type	Element
1	Current literature on HE QA, support the argument that a single one-tier system is the way forward. What is your opinion?	General	Legislative framework
2	How important do you think are the documents for transparency and operational independence in a HE QA agency? What documents do you think are necessary or important for this?	General	Standards
3	While accreditation (quality control) and academic audit (quality improvement) are regarded as major processes of quality assurance, which of these two do you think is more important for Maldives as a Small State?	General	Service delivery
4	Do you focus on research or teaching or both and Why?	Specific	Service delivery
5	Do you intend to compete against other universities? If so against who? What would u focus most to improve? Teaching? Research? Local research issues?	Specific	Service delivery
6	What do you think of global rankings?	Specific	Standards
7	What improvements have you noticed after the name change of MAB to MQA?	Specific	Legislative framework
8	What role MQA can play in establishing and maintaining internal quality assurance mechanisms or arrangements in your institution?	Specific	Service delivery
9	How important do you think is to have a single strong national agency for quality assurance in higher education for the Maldives?	Specific	Legislative framework
10	What internal quality assurance arrangements are in place in your institution?	Specific	Service delivery
11	What is your opinion about the current arrangements and procedures of accreditation and institutional audit?	Specific	Service delivery

Appendix E
Descriptions of documents used as data

Table E.1

Descriptions of documents used as data

Name of the document	Source	Type of the document	Code	Description
The Maldives National Qualifications Framework	MQA	standard	Document[1]	The National framework for all qualifications starting from Certificate 1 to PhD. It is divided into 10 levels. The descriptors of each level are also included.
The Format and Guidelines for Preparing Course Approval Document	MQA	guideline	Document[2]	The guideline for all academic programs. The HEIs have to prepare a 'course document' based on this guideline and submit it for approval.
MQA mandate	MQA	policy	Document[3]	The official mandate of the Maldives Qualifications Authority.
Terms of reference of MQA governing board	MQA	policy	Document[4]	The terms of reference of the governing board of the Maldives Qualifications Authority.
The Maldives National University Act	MNU	legislation	Document[5]	The legal Act of the Maldives National University, which is the only university in the Maldives.
Human Capital for a Knowledge Society: Higher Education in the Maldives	MoE	policy review	Document[6]	A recent study of the higher education in the Maldives carried out by World Bank.
The Strategic Action Plan – National Framework for Development 2009 – 2013	MQA	policy	Document[7]	The national strategic action plan of the Maldives for the period 2009 – 2013.
Minimum Entry Requirements for MNQF 2009	MQA	guideline	Document[8]	A supporting guideline for the Maldives National Qualifications Framework. It given minimum entry requirement/ entry criteria for each qualification on the MNQF.
MQA governing board letter by the	MQA	policy	Document[9]	The official letter by the President's Office that gave the

President's Office				decree to create the Maldives Qualifications Authority.
National Competency Standard for Fish Processing and Quality Controller	MoE	standard	Document[10]	Part of the national process to develop national competency standards for vocational education programs. These standards are only developed for lower level qualifications (Certificates 1, 2, 3 & 4).

Appendix F
The data that were not included in the document under themes

Theme: Legislation

Table F.1

Legislation

Data	Data sources
Legal Act -*Presidential decree*	
We are functioning at this moment under the rights given to the president (the executive) by the constitution and also with two parliamentary acts that is official affairs chapter one and official affairs two. Now, a lot of the powers (regulatory powers) given to the president by the constitution in this particular area has been delegated via the minister to our regulatory board.	MQA
Even now institutions do it by whatever policy they ask to be implemented although they don't have legislative power. I know we can always work out and we can always run programmes and say that we are not going to follow MQA framework, but I don't think institutions are doing that.	HEI[6]
Legislative power I really don't see much of an issue at this point in time that there is no legislation per say, because the new directive, which was issued by the president covers all those areas.	HEI[7]
And I don't believe in a system where things should be run from a presidential decree, because definitely there could be other motives coming, because a presidential decree means there would be political influence.	Industry[3]
When it is created by a parliament bill, it is much freer from other influences. So, I believe that actually if we created MAB or MQA through a parliament bill, it will be much better.	Industry[4]
Legal Act –*Enforcement of QA framework through legislation*	
An initial draft [MQA Act] in parliament [and] also an Education Act submitted by a private member, [in which the] higher education component [was] embedded. The act as it is not – perhaps being a private member bill- has not actually dealt very well with the higher education mechanism. But we have forwarded detailed commentary to the review committee in the parliament the amendments we require. So, we have a kind of two pronged approach in parliament trying to establish a regulatory legal framework; legal backing for the regulatory framework in higher education.	MQA
A national QA framework. This will be enforceable only if an act of parliament is passed. In the absence of legal instruments, it is almost impossible to regulate this area of QA.	MoE
A parliamentary statutory act coming in mean that every have to follow a system.	Industry[3]
Legal Act –*Moderate influence from outside parties*	
When there is nothing in the legal system, people always try to influence.	HEI[5]

I mean political influencing the board and how it operates. Yes, but for that to happen we also need a (parliament) act; law.	HEI[8]
We need independent body like MQA, which has legal powers where they are not influenced by other [outside parties].	HEI[9]
***Department mandates** –The change in the MQA mandate*	
The mandate of the board has been changed from an advisory role to a regulatory function.	MoE
First of all, the key functions of MQA can be summarised into four or five points. Basically, the first function is to develop and implement the Maldives National Qualifications Framework. Second key function is to develop and implement standards for quality assurance in HEIs. The third function is that of certificate validation. The fourth function is that of approval of academic programmes. And the fifth function is the quality supervision and the quality audit function.	MQA
MQA has to become in my opinion a truly regulatory agency. At this time in time, MQA is a regulatory agency; is a consultative agency; a professional development agency; a lot of things. But given the current situation in Maldives, we have to wear those multiple [too many] hats, because once again being a small country; being a small geography, we can't afford to have separate institutions.	
We see a whole lot of organisations self-regulation appearing all over from the employment side. Therefore, those roles can be shed by the MQA gradually to the competent authorities.	
Maldives Qualifications Authority is an independent regulatory agency under the Ministry of Education, which is governed by a governing board.	Document[3]
***Department mandates** –Key functions of the MQA*	
The following 9 tasks have been incorporated in to MQA mandate in addition to the previous 5 tasks. The following are the new tasks added. 1. Develop, revise and implement the National Qualifications Framework. (new). 2. Develop a system for the quality assurance of higher education and training programmes (approval, accreditation and auditing) by various institutions and formulate and implement policies needed for such a system. (new) 3. Prepare and maintain a register of the qualifications recognised by the authority. (new) 4. Develop the guidelines for the external academic audit of higher education institutions and carry out academic audit on a regular basis. (new) 5. Provide the technical assistance for higher education institutions to strengthen their internal quality assurance mechanisms. (new) 6. Coordinate with the foreign qualifications authorities in matters	MoE

related to qualifications. (new) 7. Represent Maldives in the international meetings on qualifications and give advice on behalf of Maldives in developing international guidelines for qualification recognition. (new) 8. Register bodies required to maintain quality of qualifications in Maldives and carry out the tasks required for this. (new) 9. Give advice on qualifications for higher education institutions to improve the skills and knowledge of their staff.	
At that stage when we created the Accreditation Board, we made it a mandate of the Accreditation Board to at all the resource quality, facility quality; all the inputs that has to go into the higher education programmes could be gagged, measured, evaluated, assessed by the Accreditation Board. And in doing: quality control mechanism of higher education rather than qualification focus. But now, I don't know, with qualification authority concept, perhaps they can do the same thing, but I find a little narrower – in my mind – than the accreditation concept.	Industry[5]
One route to widespread recognition could be the adoption of the principles and practices of the Bologna process. Further changes required now would be strengthening the quality assurance regime... It is clear that the combination of a current shortage of qualified staff and the workload from carrying out the present very detailed procedures is preventing MQA from carrying out its more strategic quality assurance and quality enhancement functions. A review of MQA could explore the introduction of a more balanced system, which would include: • Restructuring the organization so that its three core functions are placed in separate units: the first managing the MNQF; the second applying licensing and accrediting providers; and the third carrying out external quality assurance reviews.	Document[6]

Theme: Governance

Table F.2

Governance

Data	Data sources
Autonomy –*The nature of MQA's independence*	
Maldives Qualifications Authority is an independent regulatory agency under the Ministry of Education, which is governed by a governing board.	Document[3]
QA mechanisms and agencies should be as independent as possible from the state authorities and non states agencies and institutions.	MoE
Agencies should be independent to the extent both that they have autonomous	HEI[2]

responsibility for their operations and that the conclusions and recommendations made in their reports cannot be influenced by third parties such as higher education institutions, ministries or other stakeholders.	
Right from beginning, the idea was to make it an independent institution. To begin with, MAB came with a board. ... But then the board has not functioned independently – perhaps – of the authority (the ministry of the Education in this case).	HEI[4]
MQA has to be an independent body, which no one can influence.	HEI[5]
It should be independent.	HEI[6]
Either you give equal representation to all stakeholders or you find totally independent people and put in the board. Currently it's not independent. Ok. So we support both ideas. Actually we prefer totally independent, but again that can also lead to issues: bribery. I mean those things; that can also lead, but then the other reason why we need institutions that is not attached or autonomous body; the reason is because politically influencing a quality assurance body is a very unethical, unprofessional and also quite dangerous thing to happen. So, that is why MQA actually be de-attached from the ministry. Because currently that is what is happening. The board which is also influenced by the president's office.	HEI[8]

***Autonomy** –External influence*

Often the private colleges are at loggerheads with each other, unless issues serve their own interests [in the board]. There were supposed to be only two representatives from private colleges and several representatives from professional bodies and other qualification users.	HEI[1]
My suggestion is even to make the higher education department also independent and the Maldives Qualifications authority also independent with an independent board. So, that they can work independently. I have already seen some of the influence that are (sic) coming in.	HEI[5]
It is heavily influenced by the members; some dominant members as well as political figures. So, I don't think it's healthy for higher education or education in general, when it is influenced by political figures.	HEI[6]
Currently it's not independent. Ok. So we support both ideas. Actually we prefer totally independent, but again that can also lead to issues: bribery. I mean those things; that can also lead, but then the other reason why we need institutions that is not attached or autonomous body; the reason is because politically influencing a quality assurance body is a very unethical, unprofessional and also quite dangerous thing to happen. So, that is why MQA actually be de-attached from the ministry. Because currently that is what is happening. The board which is also influenced by the president's office.	HEI[8]
Ministries, the judiciary, Higher education institutions, or other stakeholders should not be able to influence the conclusions and recommendations made in QA reports.	MoE

***Autonomy** –Nature of influence*

If we can work with independence without political interference, whether	MQA

semi-autonomous status is fine by me, I think.	
Now, the general thinking is if you are an independent body, the government can't say anything to them. So, in that situation, the whole system can fall apart, because ultimately its government policy, which will hold the system in place. So, that danger is there. On the other hand, if there is no degree of independence, then quality standards will be compromised, because for a political reason, there will be pressures on the government bodies to influence their decisions. So, we need to strike a balance - I think.	HEI[7]
Either you give equal representation to all stakeholders or you find totally independent people and put in the board. Currently it's not independent. Ok. So we support both ideas. Actually we prefer totally independent, but again that can also lead to issues: bribery.	HEI[8]
Maldives Qualifications Authority is an independent regulatory agency under the Ministry of Education, which is governed by a governing board.	Document[3]

***Representativeness** –Board membership*

The formation of the board with a representation from both public and private sector institutions meant that MQA now gets the viewpoints of both public and private sector in their decision making.	HEI[2]
What I found after they change from MAB to MQA is, there is a board which involves different areas: people from private higher education as well as NGOs involved in the board. And the board can freely discuss and debate.	HEI[5]
I think the board profile has changed and they are now willing to include the private sector in the board.	HEI[6]
Earlier, it a very much appointed board representing government officials, but the new composition makes allowances for participation by institutes, especially the private institutes, which has a different focus. So, this has contributed to more dynamic regulatory board, which meets more often; more serious issues are discussed and debated and decisions made.	HEI[7]
Membership has been revised to include representation of private higher education sector. For the first time a Chief Executive Office who was also assigned as the Chairman of the Board was appointed in 2010. These changes reflect the intention of strengthening the regulatory aspects of quality of higher education providers in the country.	MoE
The quality of Maldivian higher education needs to be demonstrably up to international standards. As a small country the Maldives must be sure that its higher education is of high quality. This means that it is very dependent on establishing international partnerships and links so that it does not lose touch with global standards and developments in higher education. The government should consider ways of achieving this such as: • encouraging institutions to internationalise (by recruiting staff and students from overseas and arranging staff and student exchanges); • by sponsoring and promoting international partnerships and linkages and the use of international external examiners;	Document[6]

• by encouraging institutional governing bodies and boards (such as the MQA) to have members from other countries; and	

***Representativeness** –Equal representation in the board*

It is heavily influenced by the members; some dominant members as well as political figures.	HEI[6]
So, this has contributed to more dynamic regulatory board, which meets more often; more serious issues are discussed and debated and decisions made.	HEI[7]
Obviously, with the change, a new board has been formulated and there are issues in electing members for the board also..... my concern is the equal opportunities among the private sector education providers.	HEI[8]

***Conflict of interest** –Individual interests*

Often the private colleges are at loggerheads with each other, unless issues serve their own [individual HEI] interests.	HEI[1]
Many private colleges began to exert a greater influence at the policy level buoyed by their finances and support of the Government. Some senior administrators of private colleges who are [dominant members backed by political figures who] have close links with HEP or are MPs or political advisors to HEP; they have started exploiting this link to further their own agendas.	
Who have their own institutions or who at the top level in National University or whatever. So, their own individual interests are actually of more concern to them than acting as a member of the MQA board. So, I think we can have intellectuals who are well versed with higher education; who are well versed with quality assurance; who doesn't have conflicting interests then I think this can be achieved.	HEI[6]
I think one way to go about it is when include members at the board (at the governing level/at the policy level), they shouldn't have conflicting interests.	
Always it will be there (conflict). A small state and everybody knows each other very well. So some sort of influence will be there.	HEI[9]

***Transparency in policy formulation** –Processes and procedures*

We firmly believe in transparency and the most important mechanism for unbiased decision making will be operational standards or standard operational procedures (SOP).	MQA
I think it should be very transparent. I think they would have to show what are the procedures, which they would like to follow.	Industry[1]
It's not transparent at all. Everything comes as a surprise.	HEI[6]
The processes that are written down and published and available for all concerned the better.	HEI[7]
we come to know that the board is making amendment after amendment to the MNQF and this was not communicated to us properly.	HEI[8]

Theme: Organisational structure

Table F.3

Organisational structure

Data	Data sources
***One-tier system** –Current organisational structure*	
I think we've taken the right step in the one-tier system. Once again given the geography and the economic situation here, I think we have to move ahead in this particular area.	MQA
In order to avoid the tension arising from such duplication of function, a single national regulatory body for the whole spectrum of tertiary education may indeed be better in a resource constrained small state like the Maldives.	MoE
Maldives is having single-tier system, right and emerging developments as such, is there any new developments in Maldives? I doubt it's just name change of MQA.	HEI[3]
So, what I am saying is, I go with your idea of one-tier system that is one strong body.	HEI[4]
I think the best way is the higher education quality system to be looked after or maintained by one particular body.	HEI[5]
In the case of the Maldives, I would advocate strongly for a single unified system here, because one thing we don't have that many people.	HEI[7]
The most appropriate way for the Maldives (a small state) I think should be just have one-tier single body to look after.	HEI[8]
For emerging all the qualification bodies like registering and assessing the system in different departments; if we are having one single body, we can maintain the standard and also we could have a [single direction for everyone with] national standard of the criteria and things and we can have a sustained curriculum system in the local education.	HEI[9]
I think a similar (one-tier) system can be adapted in Maldives as well, because I think there should be one authority who is looking forward to getting these qualifications accredited plus overlooking on monitoring the quality of education in the institutes, which have been established in Maldives.	Industry[1]
I would firmly support the idea of a one tier system, because especially us being a small country, having two tier or any other model wouldn't work for us.	Industry[3]
***One-tier system** –Benefits of one-tier system*	
It will be much easier to have one body.	HEI[5]
Certainly having one single body is something that I think is more appropriate for Maldives.	HEI[8]
For a country like Maldives where are seeing processes of many private people coming into providing education, and also a lot [of] us depend on higher education we have to go abroad. So, since we are in a situation like this, it is very important that we have one agency or one body who can	HEI[9]

control; who can [monitor and] set national standards for the education the Maldivians should have.	
For emerging all the qualification bodies like registering and assessing the system in different departments; if we are having one single body, we can maintain the standard and also we could have a [single direction for everyone with] national standard of the criteria and things and we can have a sustained curriculum system in the local education.	
In order to avoid the tension arising from such duplication of function, a single national regulatory body for the whole spectrum of tertiary education may indeed be better in a resource constrained small state like the Maldives.	MoE

***One-tier system** –Suitability of one-tier system for Small States*

In a small state like the Maldives, there is hardly enough financial resources to set up too many institutional mechanisms that have quality assurance functions in their mandates.	MoE
A strong national agency for quality assurance is very important for the Maldives. In a country where higher education is still in the growth phase it is very important that we maintain high quality in all our programmes. In addition, we lack the breadth of expertise in most of our institutions hence we need an agency that can support our institutions in quality assurance.	HEI[2]
We don't have resources to duplicate.	HEI[7]
I mean even if you look at it from a political point of view, having many different bodies – I know we have come up with provinces and so forth – but I don't that each province should have a MQA or a body which will approve their certificates. And that is not going to work, given the size and the number of the institutions in Maldives.	HEI[8]
I would firmly support the idea of a one tier system, because especially us being a small country, having two tier or any other model wouldn't work for us.	Industry[3]

***One-tier system** –Two-tier system is duplication*

The numbers are small. So we don't have resources to duplicate.	HEI[7]
Single strong national agency is a must. You can't have two agencies, because then we will not even get the end part – you know. People will not have confidence in which to choose and not choose and which is better and not better. Single part it's definitely yes. Because it will give a single direction for everyone to move forward.	HEI[3]
I would firmly support the idea of a one tier system, because especially us being a small country, having two tier or any other model wouldn't work for us. Because then there will be duplication of work.	Industry[3]

Theme: Process of setting standards

Table F.4

Process of setting standards

Data	Data sources
Standards and guidelines –*Important standards and guidelines*	
The documents that are important include Use of internal quality assurance procedures – how institutions use their internal procedures should be documented at the agency External quality assurance processes: Criteria for decisions Reporting procedure Follow-up procedures - processes which contain recommendations for action or which require a subsequent action plan Periodic reviews - length of the cycle and the review procedures to be used should be clearly defined and published in advance. System-wide analyses - produce from time to time summary reports describing and analysing the general findings of their reviews, evaluations, assessments etc	HEI[2]
Develop to fit the framework as well as entire institutions will go for the national standards – you know – everyone will go in the same direction.	HEI[3]
The framework is internationally benchmarked, flexible, and responsive to the national, economic and social development of the Maldives. As a key step to promote international benchmarking of the qualifications, the Maldives Accreditation Board aligned qualifications to its 10 level framework using the level descriptors of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF).	Document[1]
The Maldives National Qualification Framework (MNQF) was established by the Maldives Accreditation Board (MAB) to provide learners, employers, and education providers in the Maldives with a framework that ensures that qualifications are nationally standardized and quality assured. The MNQF incorporates technical and vocational qualifications that provide parity of esteem between these qualifications and academic qualifications, as well as the opportunity for the government to put in place sustainable and strategic solutions for national human resource development needs.	Document[6]
The NCS are developed in consultation with Employment Sector Councils representing employers. They are designed using a consensus format endorsed by the Maldives Accreditation Board (MAB) to maintain uniformity of approach and the consistency of content amongst occupations. This single format also simplifies benchmarking the NCS against relevant regional and international standards.	Document[10]

Standards and guidelines *–Current status of developing standards and guidelines*	
We have standard operational procedures for every action we take. We have in legal terms. We have it written down. We have a file that can be accessed to any party who could. So, all our SOPs are there articulated in a document that can be (accessed). We have transferred those verbal operational procedures to flow charts that are being used by all of our staff here. Now, with the new upgrade in our website all the flow charts will b up in the website.	MQA
I think now in my experience, the approval process is going on and at the moment the first stage of supervision is also good. Then next stage is audit system, which I believe from 1st of September (2011), MQA qualifications framework (revised QF) will be fully implemented. So, all these things will start functioning. So then we will know what kinds of documents are having difficulties.	HEI[5]
Now, Dr. xxx the other day had some documents for quality assurance, but you can see it was just a take out from the internet – probably some systems are used, which is good, but you can't just take it per say.	HEI[7]
What other countries are doing that is very good and what they say are the benchmarks that have to meet. It is not for us to 're-invent the wheel' and it is not up to Maldivian to try and create a system that is not in keeping with what the [other] best countries are doing or the best economies are doing. So, in that sense, we have to follow these guidelines, but beyond that is what I am saying that we have our own local situation that must be addressed.	Industry[2]
Stakeholder involvement in setting standards *–Engage with stakeholders*	
I think the agency or the authority can also develop with the institutes; with the colleges; with the university. If you think that we can develop by ourselves, - I think – it may not be right perhaps. So, in which case – I think – it is important if the colleges and even the university come together, give them also some kind of ownership of some of the policies.	HEI[4]
Instead of MQA trying to struggle on its own to do these things, why don't they engage the institutes?	HEI[7]
Our philosophy is that we grow together. Therefore, we facilitate the growth of the institutions too.	MQA
These documents have been generated with a lot of public and private service delivery input. Service delivery institutions included. And we have regular workshops to actually work with the institutions and actually update this.	
We have got major participation however when we have major participation we also have major pressure groups.	
Transparency of the process of setting standards *–Standards that need to be made communicated to the general public*	
It was like September all the new courses have to start according to new syllabus; new framework and we have only few months and then suddenly we got to know. That also was not communicated to all the stakeholders. Apart from that, I don't think. That was addressed any way.	HEI[3]

Obviously all the rules and regulations; all the documents that are internally – only specifically for internal use – ok that can be kept as internal, but anything that refers to; that involves the colleges or the institutions, then these have to be available to us on their website.	HEI[8]
And for the transparency, I think whatever standards MQA set or whatever documents they have, in their system, it has to be communicated to the general public.	HEI[9]
I think the procedure manuals should be online or transparent for the public to see and also, how these audits are conducted and what are the results also should be published	Industry[1]
As far as documents are concerned, I believe all the related documents related to approving certificates, it should be available.	Industry[4]
Transparency of the process of setting standards –*Methods of transparency*	
If they have a procedure for certificate approval, it has to be up there; if they have a procedure for course approval, it has to be up on the website and disseminate it; if there is a appeal process procedure, that has to be there. You know all these have to be there. One important thing is that all this to e updated.	HEI[8]
It should e available on MQA website; it should be available from other educational forums through which people can download it, can see it. So, this kind of transparency must be there just to ensure that the MQA is a trusted body that people can rely on.	HEI[9]
What I believe is it should be available through leaflets or through their website.	Industry[4]

Theme: Scope of standards

Table F.5

Scope of standards

Data	Data sources
Quality of higher education –*Graduate numbers and programmes*	
Actually my opinion on the quality of higher education in the Maldives is mostly based on merit, which I find quite often even that from primary school to secondary school even from the higher education; the need of the industry has been undermined.	Industry[1]
There are not enough graduates coming out especially in the field of Business Management, Accounting and professional in the industrial and Business fields.	Industry[3]
Quality of higher education –*Content and delivery*	
I would say not only the contents and the quality, but the mindset as well. Because if you take Maldivian education system, if you see the industry, we have a lot of foreign accountants. We have a lot of people who are working in the financial sector are foreigners. Because we don't have the kind of	Industry[1]

qualifications in our (country).	
I think our experience is, there is no quality assurance in the sense we expect from the system is that people coming out of these institutions and educational establishments and institutions they are able to cope and be able to perform in their jobs or duties that are requited of them. And this is lacking with most graduates coming out of the system.	Industry[2]
So you just go to the university and come back, but your attitude, your mind set...all this needs to change. So it starts from the very beginning; from the educational system.	Industry[3]
We also evaluate the trainers with the students to see like – you know – how good the teachers are when presenting it and also we do by the name of the exams we know, how students are performing it and trainers also we just don't take trainers.	HEI[3]
Global rankings *–Ranking concept*	
I feel that the global rankings are important for developing universities to set their standards.	HEI[2]
Ranking concept is good. Who does it and how it's done is where the question comes in.	HEI[3]
Perhaps when ranking is done all these factors are considered. To me it guides people, but I am not saying that is the best mechanism. What I am saying is, right now, in the absence of other mechanisms or even otherwise you look at it is only for the name: name of the university.	HEI[4]
My view point is actually in favour of these global rankings.	HEI[6]
I don't think that's (global rankings) a good idea. And I don't think it serves any purpose. At the same time, it contributes to an elite concept of universities.	HEI[7]
We also have to consider access to resources. Now, put it this way. If you look at institutes like Harvard or Oxbridge now, those kind of world famous and – you know – highly academic kind of institutions with that projected image, if you define success according to their standards, and others have to follow that, and they control the outcomes they control the resources in one way or another how can other universities can compete.	
When you send me the questions, I have been actually going through them and I was thinking about this and obviously this is a marketing gimmick [for industrialised countries].	HEI[8]
If it is done just to make western people and American happy to ensure their supremacy in the world. I don't know. I don't see anything related to this ranking to the 3rd world countries.	HEI[9]
The concept of ranking is simply to maintain the supremacy of Europeans and westerners in education throughout the world.	
Global rankings *–Ranking as a benchmark and guide*	
I feel that the global rankings are important for developing universities to set their standards. Global rankings may not be very appropriate to compare a	HEI[2]

growing university with a well established university such as Oxford. However, a university such as MNU can always strive to be listed on the global rankings so that university as a whole has a direction to strive for. I find the global rankings an important aspect for universities to grow and compete.	
End of the day, it's a global village. So, a lot of people go out and work. A lot of people work in multi-national companies like as such. So, you have to have benchmarking in a global village.	HEI[3]
If you benchmark against one of the universities then you can also develop more. And the workforce right now, you come out with a local or global university, it's been catering to the global world.	
When you look at the world rankings, it gives you some idea.	HEI[4]
So, what I am trying to say is, it guides people.	
it is useful to get up in the rankings and have some global benchmarks against which the universities to measure themselves in terms of standards; in terms of good practices; good academic practices; sharing of information, knowledge and experience. So, that you can work towards common standards.	HEI[7]

Global rankings –*Regional rankings*

I think it has to be not global ranking, it has to be regional ranking, because – you know – the universities are may be developed, but the people are not developed. And the people who are implementing, the people who are in the government, the people who are in the organisations, they are not developed. And the industries are also not in that ranking (standard?). How can we rank globally?	HEI[5]
They can have like regional ranking and then like in Maldives we can have only the Maldives ranking within the Maldives.	
May be they (3rd world countries) should also think of something else and they should come up with their own ranking also. Something like that.	HEI[8]
If it is done just to make western people and American happy to ensure their supremacy in the world. I don't know. I don't see anything related to this ranking to the 3rd world countries.	HEI[9]
The concept of ranking is simply to maintain the supremacy of Europeans and westerners in education throughout the world.	

Industry linkages –*Nature of industry involvement*

I think up to now up to last year there were no linkages, but I think the newly formed national university has given one or two seats for the industry representatives.	Industry[1]
We do not know. I have no idea of what's going in that area [quality assurance]. Absolutely no.	Industry[2]
I don't think [the MQA] system recognises the importance of the industries [yet they employ graduates]. I think we are at a very infant stage of realising this, which is why the Maldives does not have the required people for the	Industry[3]

required fields of work, which is why we are lost somewhere.	
Industry linkages *–Nature of industry involvement*	
I think they should get more inputs where average for example our key industry is the tourism industry where every year what are our needs of the graduates.	Industry[1]
Actually, I believe there should be a say by the industry, because when they design a programme, they [HEIs] are training people for those industries.	Industry[4]
If the service provider is providing a service that is made use of by the candidate to go into an employment sector and if the employment sector readily accepts those candidates, then everything is good.	MQA
There can be a mix of training off the job and training in the workplace with assessment results being combined towards a full award. Assessment can be conducted in the workplace. Assessment can recognise prior learning and award competencies without course attendance.	Document[1]

Theme: Accreditation

Table F.6

Accreditation

Data	Data sources
Institutional accreditation *–The importance of institutional accreditation*	
If the college is accredited, the programmes are accredited. So, that's how I believe. But here in the Maldives, the programmes approved but institutional accreditation is not being done.	HEI[5]
They have to accredit college first and then from that the accreditation body must identify that ok, this college if they provide this programme, this will have that quality, because that came through that process of accreditation.	
We can only deliver the programme only when the college is accredited, because the college can be accredited only when the system is in place in the college.	
In terms of performance in accreditation, I think with regard to framework, they still need to understand the uniqueness of each institution.	HEI[6]
Programme accreditation *–Course approval*	
A lot of work is being done in the area of course approval. When I say a lot of work we mean once again MNQF 2009 articulates level descriptors at each MNQF level.	MQA
I am not sure about the institutional audit, but accreditation of the programmes is good right now.	HEI[3]
Frankly speaking, at the moment we don't really have any arrangements for this. That's the bottom line. There is a very minimal intervention by the MQA when people submit documents for course approval and even that – I don't	HEI[7]

think – is done properly.	
To ensure that, accreditation and approval is very important. It has to be there, but issues are there in terms of – it should not be a bottleneck for this process. Because currently, it is a bottleneck. I mean we can work very hard and submit all the proposals, but it will take ages to come out from the other end. It's a huge bottleneck.	HEI[8]
Some countries have a time limit on accreditation of programs and will expect institutions to re-apply [renew their accreditation] when that limit expires.	Document[6]
Re-engineering and simplifying the processes involved in approving new programs offered by the private sector. This would remove the MQA's image of being a policeman rather than an advisor and enabler.	
Programme accreditation *–Delay in getting approval*	
Let me also note another point of discussion we had with xxx and team at a Workshop at Traders Hotel. A discussion arose whether MQA accreditation or AQA accreditation is a mark of quality. Most were in agreement, that at a semantic level, at least, MQA accreditation is NOT a mark of quality. What MQA and other agencies are doing is checking whether the courses and their delivery meet some criteria or standards [to see all the programmes meet minimum standards]. So, essentially, MQA approval simply means that certain standards are met. Now quality is something else. It connotes superior, excellent, elevated or of high rank. Now, for something to be of quality there must be some that are not. If all programmes are quality assured, then this term is an oxymoron. Thus, by thinking critically about the issue, we may say that what most agencies are doing is checking out to see that all programmes meet the **minimum** standards. We have to use another method to identify what the quality programmes are well above those just meet the minimum requirements. I hope I have made this clear. Accreditation simply means that minimum standards are met; not that the programmes are of quality. You may think about this point and get back to me later. Quality is a different matter, altogether.	HEI[1]
Only complain which all the institutions might have is sometimes the delay.	HEI[3]
I mean we can work very hard and submit all the proposals, but it will take ages to come out from the other end.	HEI[8]
Re-engineering and simplifying the processes involved in approving new programs offered by the private sector.	Document[6]

Theme: Academic audit

Table F.7

Academic audit

Data	Data sources
Institutional audit *–Audit as quality improvement*	

I want to see more of a change in the quality improvement aspect where MQA carries out external audit and the HEIs conduct their own regular internal audits	HEI[2]
MQA or the government or somebody or from independent body has to come and evaluate and recognise what we are doing.	HEI[5]
With regard to quality audit from the government side, I think, it is still in a very infant stage.	HEI[6]
So far, from a distance, what I see is, they have borrowed a lot from here and there and they are trying to do a lot initially in terms of quality improvement.	
They have to initially start with a model or a framework for quality audit; quality improvement and then gradually build on that.	
They are doing very less in terms on quality improvement.	HEI[9]

***Institutional audit** –From supervision to audit*

Supervision is a very time consuming process, where before certificates are awarded to a batch of graduates in any corner of the country, a supervisor from MQA actually visit the institution, check the records and then authorises the awarding of the certificates w are now facing that out those institution where we have adequate confidence about their internal quality assurance mechanisms.	MQA
Now, this is a process where gradually bringing to a halt and this process will be replaced by the quality audits where we will be auditing the quality of quality assurance mechanisms instilled in the institutions.	
What we need to see is more visitations by the accrediting authorities or the institutions like the universities like the polytechnics and TAFE colleges to be here and understand our situation before they accredit our institutions.	Industry[2]
I say so since MQA is more into approving courses and programmes and no concrete work has been done to carry out academic audit or external audit of the institutions.	HEI[2]

***Institutional audit** –Audit process*

It is important to ensure that the auditors / panel members have the right qualifications with respect to the field of study audited. The appropriate training for auditors is essential.	MoE
Selection of panel chair requires careful considerations too.	
I want to see more of a change in the quality improvement aspect where MQA carries out external audit as well as train the institutions to carry out internal audits [self assessments] of themselves.	HEI[2]
I think (audit report) it should be made public, because the consumers have the right to know.	HEI[7]
I think instead getting people from abroad, we can start it with may be local experts [opposed to overseas experts] to [be] include[d] in the panel.	HEI[9]
External quality assessments (EQAs) are the usual form of check that governments rely on to be assured that institutions are serious about	Document[6]

maintaining quality. These EQAs are carried out by a national agency on a cycle ranging from five to seven years and usually focus on the institution rather than an academic program. The standard approach is for the institution to complete a self-assessment exercise (to a standard format), which is then submitted to the quality agency; this is followed up by a team of reviewers who visit an institution and discuss the self assessment.	
***Programme audit** –Supervision*	
Audit is concerned any way, definitely like supervision has been happening after the courses. So, where all the inputs are checked by MQA.	HEI[3]
The role of MQA should be not only approving programmes, but they have to check whether HEIs are maintaining quality. To do that, they should always audit the progress.	Industry[4]
The MQA carries out very detailed checks on the study records of each batch of students seeking to graduate from private sector colleges before it authorizes their entitlement to an award. This is highly labour-intensive and imposes a heavy burden on the small staff available to the MQA, and delays the process of quality assurance. However, governments may also request reviews of specific academic programs where they have concerns.	Document[6]

Theme: Transparency

Table F.8

Transparency in service delivery

Data	Data sources
***Transparency of the services** –HEIs meeting QA standards*	
MNU has a very comprehensive quality assurance mechanism at the course development stage. However, MNU has to develop further its quality enhancement mechanism by initiating an internal audit mechanism including student reviews, peer reviews and course reviews as a whole. MQA can assist us as well as all other institutions by providing the necessary expertise in carrying out internal quality assurance. MQA can run training programmes to advise us on how to carry out internal quality assurance. MQA can also advocate a quality culture development within the institutions.	HEI[2]
We tie up with international partnerships where we adhere to their guidelines; their quality assurance policies.	HEI[3]
We look at MQA standards and then based on MQA standards we have our strategic plan.	HEI[4]
Since the new framework was introduced in 2009, the institution has been preparing itself to implement all the changes in the framework. We have a very mechanism in place plus external affiliations and external authorities and internal bodies to make sure everything runs smoothly.	HEI[6]

Because we are running British programmes, we get visits from British universities. They want to see how we do things.	
We have a set of processes through which – like – we ensure that various modules are delivered as per the outline, the content coverage is ensured, the assessment is as per the course documents, that standards are maintained in assessment processes.	HEI[7]
As suggested or included in our proposal, we have an internal quality assurance cell. To be honest, it's not functioning.	HEI[8]
Transparency of the services *–Transparency of QA activities at HEIs*	
Each and every course we have different kind of forms to check from the students different kind of survey reports (student surveys?) we have. We are doing that also to assure the quality and for that reason, we have very few dropouts and very few complaints.	HEI[5]
With the limited resources we have, we are doing very well. Recently [two Australian experts involved in a local QA training project] visited and we showed then our quality assurance mechanisms and everything we have in place and they were very impressed.	HEI[6]
Ideally the more transparent an organisation is, more effective and more accepted by public also.	HEI[8]
We have an internal quality assurance cell. To be honest, it's not functioning. I mean, I will not share this with anybody else, but this is an interview; I can share. It's not functioning because I am finding it hard to keep a staff here.	
Unless you are transparent, unless you are honest with what you do, and follow the due process, you know, you wouldn't be able to have [a good quality education system].	Industry[3]

Theme: Collaboration in service delivery

Table F.9

Collaboration in service delivery

Data	Data sources
Collaboration *–Relationship between QA agency and HEIs*	
I think – it is important if the colleges and even the university come together, give them also some kind of ownership of some of the policies. You know Policies are developed together. Initiatives are - at least the task of working on a document – may be for the specialists, but the ideas can be discussed initially before the actual policies are formulated.	HEI[4]
It is a more collaborative manner I think to get things done.	HEI[6]
I think the key is collaboration rather than confrontations.	HEI[7]
First of all, they can come up with their guiding documents. What is it that they want to see? How it is done? And these kind of documents they can come up with and then possibly work with us not like a policing or enforcing	HEI[8]

agency; work together. Because their goal and our goal is the same: improve quality and maintain quality. So, that is very important.	
So, these things must be communicated to their stakeholders in advance before it is announced; more linkages with institutions.	HEI[9]
Our philosophy is that we grow together. Therefore, we facilitate the growth of the institutions too. That's why we are investing a lot of our energies to this area. Supervision and internal audit also uses a lot our energies.	MQA

***Collaboration** –Collaboration between HEIs*

The association is [helpful], not only for voicing concerns [to the government], but [it is also helpful] within the institutions.	HEI[3]
We are inviting all these institutions to sit in one table and discuss about our common problems where we can work towards common goal.	HEI[6]
We formed the association to look after our interests; to protect our interests.	HEI[8]

***Collaboration** –Collaboration across boarders*

Commitment to collaborate across borders: This is especially useful for the Maldives and other small states too. With limited pool of human resources and in early stages of establishment of procedures there is a lot that could be share among states. Furthermore, recognition of certificates across borders requires an open minded commitment to cooperate among countries.	MoE
There are various ways in which small emerging economies can ensure that the quality of their higher education system is in line with global standards. These include:	Document[6]
• the establishment of national quality assurance agencies (which in small states may have strong links with other regional quality systems);	
• encouraging the use of external examiners from other countries;	
• provision of funds to support overseas scholarships and PhDs for teaching staff so that they absorb international norms, standards and practices; and	
• promoting collaborative partnerships with universities in other countries which can lead to their validation of programs and the exchange of staff and students.	
We are running British programmes, we get visits from British universities.	HEI[6]

Appendix G
QUT Low Risk Human Application Form

January 2011

Queensland University of Technology
Brisbane Australia

University Human Research Ethics Committee

APPLICATION FOR REVIEW OF LOW RISK RESEARCH INVOLVING

HUMAN PARTICIPANTS

PLEASE NOTE: **If you do not see the red *"hidden text"* (which provides guidance to the questions):**

Click on the Office Button (top left of the screen) then click on "Word Options" (bottom right)

Choose "Display", then under "Always show these formatting marks on the screen" tick "Hidden text"

If you wish to view hidden text when you print the document:

Click on the Office Button (top left of the screen) then click on "Word Options" (bottom right)

Choose "Display", then under

Printing Options tick "Print hidden text"

For Mac users:

Click "Preferences" on the Word menu, click "View", and then select the "Hidden text" check box.

Printing Options, click "Preferences" on the Word menu, click "Print", and then select the "Hidden text" check box.

PLEASE ENSURE HIDDEN TEXT IS NOT PRINTED WITH YOUR FINAL SUBMISSION

APPLICATION SECTIONS: A Research Proposal Overview | B Participant Overview | C Data Management | D Check List

SECTION A: RESEARCH PROPOSAL OVERVIEW

A1 Summary Information

Please provide an answer to each question in this section–N/A is not acceptable

A1.1 Project Title

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

A1.2 Brief summary of project in lay language

This study is concerned with developing a higher education quality assurance model for small States. The study involves a case study in the Maldives to explore possible linkages, similarities, challenges, issues and quality assurance options that are relevant to that of small States context. The study will explore what constitutes key elements and regulatory mechanisms of an effective quality assurance system in higher education for small States. The significance of this study is that it addresses these concerns within a systems framework providing a holistic quality assurance model in higher education for small States. These findings could serve as a useful reference for policy makers, practitioners and professionals alike.

A1.3 Participant summary

The participants for this case study will be interviewees sourced from three categories of sites representing three different elements of the higher education quality assurance in the Maldives. The three categories of sites are key officials of the government (Ministry of Education) who are at policy level, the QA regulatory body (Maldives Qualifications Authority), and higher education institutions in the Maldives.

A1.4 Summary of research merits

This study will seek in-depth understanding and reoccurring themes of 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 will then be analysed with a comparative perspective against global principles, concepts, and models in QA in higher education discussed in the literature review. Investigation of appropriateness and applicability of those that apply to Small States context will be important for this study.

The central question posed by this study is: What constitutes key elements and regulatory mechanisms of an effective QA system in higher education for Small States? To support the investigations the following sub-questions are proposed.

SQ1: What are the elements and the underpinning attributes of an effective higher education QA system?

SQ2: What are the key regulatory and supporting management and governance issues of a robust higher education QA mechanism generally and, in particular, for Small States?

SQ3: What are the operational drivers and how they may affect a higher education QA system?

Key references:

Bradley, D., Noonan, P., Nugent, H., & Scales, B. (2008). Review of Australian higher education: Final report (Bradley report) Retrieved 08 April, 2010

Daniel, J., & Kanwar, A. (2006). Quality assurance for open, distance and eLearning: Issues for developing countries. Paper presented at the World Bank Joint Client-Staff Learning Seminar on Quality Assurance in Tertiary Education. http://www.col.org/resources/speeches/2006presentations/Pages/2006-06-20.aspx

ENQA. (2006). Quality assurance of higher education in Portugal: An Assessment of the existing systema nd recommendations for a future system. Helsinki.

King, R. P. (2007). Governance and accountability in the higher education regulatory state. Higher Education, 53(4), 411-430.

Knight, J. (2006). Higher education crossing borders: COL-UNESCO.

Lewis, R. (2009). Quality assurance in higher education – its global future Higher Education to 2030 (Vol. 2, pp. 323-352): OECD.

Martin, M., & Stella, A. (2007). Understanding and assessing quality. Paris: International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP).

Stella, A. (2006). Quality assurance of cross-border higher education. [Article]. Quality in Higher Education, 12(3), 257-276. doi: 10.1080/13538320601072859

Stella, A. (2010). INQAAHE project on Small States: Situational analysis on quality assurance in Small States

Stella, A., & Gnanam, A. (2004). Quality assurance in distance education: The challenges to be addressed. [Article]. Higher Education, 47(2), 143-160.

Van Damme, D. (2000). Internationalization and quality assurance: Towards worldwide accreditation? European Journal for Education Law and Policy, 4(1), 1-20. doi: 10.1023/a:1009994906190

Woodhouse, D. (2004). The quality of quality assurance agencies. [Article]. Quality in Higher Education, 10(2), 77-87. doi: 10.1080/1353832042000230572

Woodhouse, D. (2006). Quality = Fitness for Purpose (FFP): Definition for all seasons. Paper presented at the APQN Conference on Cooperation in Quality Assurance, Shanghai.

A1.5 Provide a brief justification for considering this a low risk application.

This study is considered a low risk, because it does not involve human experimentation, animals, genetically modified organisms or bio safety.

A2 Potential Risks and Benefits*Please provide an answer to each question in this section–N/A is not acceptable*

A2.1 Potential Risks — indicate if there are any potential risks associated with the project?

Though, this study is considered a low risk as it does not involve any biological, physical testing of participants , in social research, ethical issues are said to arise from the researcher-participant relationship (Merriam, 1998). Merriam (1998) argues that "ethical dilemmas are likely to emerge with regard to collection of data and in the dissemination of finding" (p. 213). Other issues that may affect qualitative studies are the researcher's subjective interpretations of data and the design itself (Orb et al., 2000).

The above risk and ethical issues related to research design, trust, and data collection need to be anticipated and addressed along with mitigating measures adopted by most social research.

A2.2 Managing the risk

The procedures established by Simons (2009) – that are centred around the three key concepts of confidentiality, negotiation, and *accessibility* – underpin the ethical procedures for this research:

- The purpose of the study and the anticipated audience have been made clear through the project information included in the consent form.
- Access to documents that will be used for data collection will be only after obtaining permission from respective authorities;
- Informed consent will be sought for each person interviewed; this includes key officials of MoE, MQA, and higher education institutions;
- The interviews will be conducted on the principle of confidentiality;
- As indicated in Section 3.2.1, use of data will be negotiated with participants for accuracy, fairness, and relevance after transcription and before data analysis;
- No data will be reported that a participant asks to be kept in confidence;
- Explicit permission of the respondent will be sought for direct quotation and attributed judgements; and
- Pseudonyms will be used in reporting individuals and institutions (Simons, 2009).

In addition to these procedures, to mitigate against the researcher-participant relationship, the researcher acknowledges this bias by reporting it and trying to understand the setting or context as a whole in order to make "correct" interpretations of research findings. Measures recommended by Mehra (2002) will be used to monitor bias and subjectivity. These measures include recording in a little notebook personal reactions to what we hear and see in the fieldwork. Though such a subjectivity journal is ideally not recommended to be included in the thesis itself, Mehra advised a regular review of such a journal so that it will put the researcher in touch with the beliefs and biases, and in turn may force the researcher to be more "objective".

A2.3 Potential Benefits — indicate if there are any potential benefits associated with the project and who benefits?

The current trend in HE quality assurance is that everybody seem to be measuring quality of higher education against a global agenda, including global higher education rankings (Pillay & Kimber, 2009). Recognising this misinformed push, the contribution of this research is looking to develop an alternative model for higher education QA for small States that serves the local community and national demands instead of seeking ranking on global system that may have limited value to the local HE context to support the national economic and social development of the small States.

Another benefit of this research is it adopt as systems approach. Rather than focusing simply on few selected aspects of QA in HE.

It will provide an analysis of focus areas in higher education QA and the key elements and their relationships in making a holistic QA system effective. The three main elements of higher education QA emphasised in this study, which will constitute the model for Small States are: (1) legislative framework, (2) standards, and (3) service delivery. This study will also serve as a useful reference of QA in higher education for policy makers, practitioners and professionals alike.

A2.4 Balancing against the risks

Possible risks mentioned above are possible bias in findings due researcher's close association with the QA agency in the Maldives and difficulty to maintain total objectivity because the researcher is familiar to the research setting. These are ethical dilemmas as mentioned by Merriam (1998). However, the benefits outlined under A2.3, outweigh these risks for three reasons. First, the researcher is well aware of the risks and proposes ways to mitigate against these possible risks. Second, the benefits outlined indicate that this research is unique because it is concerned to develop a higher education quality assurance to the Small States context; an approach which is missing. Third, the gap this research will fill by providing a holistic quality assurance model in general and linking it to Small States will have a great impact.

A3 Other General Information

Please provide an answer to each question in this section–N/A is not acceptable

A3.1 Location of research – where the research will be conducted

The data collection will be carried out in the Maldives, which is a small State. There will be interviews and document analysis as processes for data collection. The interviewees will be contacted in their individual capacity, which does not require an official approval or permission from their workplaces.

A3.2 Is the QUT Human Research Ethics Committee (UHREC) the primary or only ethics committee reviewing this proposal? If not, please provide details.

This study requires only low risk QUT Human Research Ethics Committee approval.

A3.3 Estimated timeframes for the project, ie DD / MM / YEAR

Please note: Data collection cannot commence until you have received formal written approval.

START OF PROJECT	**22 February 2010**	**START OF DATA COLLECTION**	**1 July 2011**
END OF PROJECT	**21 February 2013**	**END OF DATA COLLECTION**	**30 September 2011**

SECTION B: PARTICIPANT OVERVIEW

B1.1 Who will be approached to participate?

The interviewees will be selected from three categories of sites in the Maldives: Ministry of Education, the Maldives Qualifications Authority and leading higher education institutions.

B1.2 Approximately how many participants will be approached?

The total number of participants is approximately 13 from these three categories of sites.

B1.3 How will the participants be approached?

The participants will be approached initially through telephone, email or by face-to-face. The official consent will be obtained according to QUT guidelines prior to proceeding with the interviews

B1.4 How will the participants provide their consent to participate?

The participants will be given structured interview questions in advance of the interviews and will be asked to sign the official participant information and consent form.

B1.5 [ ] **YES** [X] **NO** **Will the study involve participants who are unable to give informed consent?**

If YES, please include details.

B1.6 Will the potential participants be screened?

No.

B1.7 Will participants be offered reimbursements, payments or incentives? Ensure details of any reimbursements, payments or incentives (eg gift voucher) are provided on the Participant Information Sheet.

No.

B1.8 Is there an existing relationship with participants?

As the Maldives is a small country, people are usually familiar with each other. Some of the people who will be interviewed are people familiar to the researcher. This is especially in the capacity of a middle level government official held by the researcher prior to commencing PhD studies at QUT. Otherwise, the researcher has no special relationship with the participants.

B1.9 Is it proposed to conduct a debriefing session at the end of the research (or at the end of each participant's involvement)?

No. This research does not involve deception and there is no element in the research that may cause distress among participants.

B1.10 Will feedback, the outcome / results of this research be reported to participants?

There is no intention of reporting the outcome/ results to participants as it is not obligatory and will not be a condition for obtaining the consent of the participants. However, if a participant is interested to get the final results, the researcher has no objection to provide them the final outcome. The participant will be invited to comment on the transcript of their respective interviews to ensure accuracy of the data.

SECTION C: DATA MANAGEMENT

C1 Future Use of Data

C1.1 [ ] **YES** [X] **NO** **Will any of the data collected be used by yourself, or others for any other purpose other than for this clearance? If yes, please describe below and ensure this is outlined in all the participant information sheets and consent forms generated under the clearance.**

Some findings of the research may be used in writing journal articles and may be included in conference papers during the PhD journey. However, it will only be used by the researcher.

C2 Procedures & Protection

C2.1 What data collection procedures will be utilised?

☐	**YES**	☐	**NO**	**QUESTIONNAIRE / SURVEY**	✓	**YES**	☐	**NO**	**ARCHIVAL RECORDS**
✓	**YES**	☐	**NO**	**INTERVIEWS**	☐	**YES**	☐	**NO**	**OTHER INSTRUMENT**
☐	**YES**	☐	**NO**	**FOCUS GROUPS**					

If you have indicated OTHER INSTRUMENT provide details.

If there is insufficient space, please provide an additional document.

C2.2 ☐ **YES** X **NO** **Have the data collection procedures been previously approved by QUT or are they an academic standard instrument?**

C2.3 Provide brief details on prior approval or where instruments have been used previously, eg under a similar context to this proposal.

PhD stage 2 proposal was approved. Apart from that, there is no previous approval by QUT of the data collection procedures. Similarly, there is no particular information whether the same instruments have been used in studies of higher education quality assurance. However, similar instruments (interviews and document analysis) have been widely used in many educational contexts.

C2.4 How will the data be recorded?

☐	**YES**	X	**NO**	**Individually Identifiable**
☐	**YES**	X	**NO**	**Re-Identifiable or Potentially Re-Identifiable**
✓	**YES**	☐	**NO**	**Non-Identifiable**

C2.5 Data Ownership

As a Phd student, by default, the researcher will own the data and IP arising out of this project.

C2.6 Protecting Confidentiality

The identities of the participants will be protected and will not be revealed to a third party. The research team will not listen to audio recording and will only see the non-identifiable transcripts to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

C2.7 Data Sharing Arrangements (collaborative projects)

This research is not a collaborative project.

C3 Storage & Security

C3.1 [✓] **YES** [ ] **NO** **Will records be stored for required period**

C3.2 HARD/PAPER COPIES...

C3.2.1	**What is the location of storage (ie room and building location)?**	B 353, Kelvin Grove Campus, QUT
C3.2.2	**How will access to the stored data be controlled?**	By a key
C3.2.3	**Who will have access to the stored data?**	The researcher (the student)

C3.3 ELECTRONIC DATA...

C3.3.1	**Where is the location of storage (ie a secure computer/server)**	QUT secure computer server (student drive at QUT local network)
C3.3.2	**How will access to the stored data be controlled?**	By secure password
C3.3.3	**Who will have access to the stored data?**	The researcher (the student)

C3.4 [ ] **YES** [ ] **NO** [✓] **N/A** **If applicable, has Faculty approval been provided for off-site storage**

SECTION D: CHECK LIST

You MUST check off each item (as appropriate) that will be submitted with your application.

You MUST provide all data collection documents when submitting your application.

Incomplete applications will not be reviewed and will be returned to the researcher.

General

[✓] **YES** [ ] **NO** Faculty Research Ethics Advisor input / advice has been gained

Coversheet

[✓] **YES** [ ] **NO** Submit your complete application electronically to: ethicscontact@qut.edu.au

[✓] **YES** [ ] **NO** Provide a copy signed by yourself, your supervisor (if applicable) and the Head of School to:

Research Ethics Unit ***Level 4*** ***88 Musk Avenue*** ***Kelvin Grove***

[✓] **YES** [ ] **NO** **Faculty of Education** applications submit electronically to: k.dooley@qut.edu.au

[ ] **YES** [ ] **NO** **Faculty of Business** applications submit electronically to: t.nguyen@qut.edu.au

Application –include (if applicable)...

☐ **YES**	☒ **N/A**	Email invitation text / Telephone invitation script / Lecture invitation script
☐ **YES**	☒ **N/A**	Recruitment flyer / Poster / Newspaper advertisement / Social networking sites text
☐ **YES**	☒ **N/A**	Any other recruitment materials
☐ **YES**	☐ **N/A**	Brief literature review if not included under A1.2
☐ **YES**	☒ **N/A**	Ethics approvals from collaborating institutions
☐ **YES**	☐ **N/A**	Permission from organisations where you will be conducting the research (email or letter*****)
☐ **YES**	☒ **N/A**	Translator–Transcriber Confidentiality Agreement
☐ **YES**	☐ **N/A**	Intellectual Property (IP) assignment document

Participant Information Sheet / Consent form – include (if applicable)...**

☐ **YES**	☒ **N/A**	Participant Information Sheet for experimental procedures
☐ **YES**	☒ **N/A**	Participant Information Sheet for anonymous questionnaire
☐ **YES**	☒ **N/A**	Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form for questionnaire
☑ **YES**	☐ **N/A**	Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form for interview / focus group
☐ **YES**	☒ **N/A**	Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form – Image Release
☐ **YES**	☐ **N/A**	Withdrawal of Consent Form (if written consent will be gained)

Data Collection Tools – include (if applicable)...

☐ **YES**	☒ **N/A**	Questionnaire(s) / survey(s)
☑ **YES**	☐ **N/A**	Interview / focus group questions
☐ **YES**	☒ **N/A**	Details of all tests with sufficient information to judge risks involved in their use

Other Documentation – include (if applicable)...

☐ **YES**	☒ **N/A**	Please provide details:	

***** These need to be official documents on letterhead paper where possible.

****** Ensure that if submitting multiple Participant Information Sheet and Consent form, that that each is clearly labelled (in the header) with participant group and/or data collection tool, where appropriate.

Appendix H
QUT Low Risk Participant Information and Consent Form for Interview

Queensland University of Technology
Brisbane Australia

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION FOR QUT RESEARCH PROJECT

Interview

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

QUT Ethics Approval Number XXXXXX

RESEARCH TEAM

Principal Researcher: Abdul Hannan Waheed, PhD student, QUT

Associate Researcher(s):

DESCRIPTION

This project is being undertaken as part of PhD research project for Abdul Hanna Waheed. The project is a part of the research 'A Quality Assurance Model for Small States: The Maldives Case Study'. The results of the project will be used to inform a holistic model for quality assurance in higher education for Small States.

The purpose of this project is to develop a higher education quality assurance model for Small States by investigating what constitutes the key elements and regulatory mechanisms of an effective quality assurance system in higher education for Small States. The study is designed to identify the underlying principles, major concepts as well as operational drivers in higher education quality assurance systems.

You are invited to participate in this research project as you are a stakeholder in the higher education quality assurance in the Maldives.

I am requesting your assistance in this research because we believe that exploring stakeholders' understanding of higher education quality assurance issues is important to develop an in-depth knowledge of this area.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this project is entirely voluntary. If you do agree to participate, you can withdraw from the project at any time without comment or penalty. Any identifiable information already obtained from you will be destroyed. Your decision to participate, or not participate, will in no way impact upon your current or future relationship with QUT or with your employing body.

Your participation will involve an audio recorded interview at your organisation or other agreed location, that will take approximately 60 minutes of your time. Questions will include 10 to 15 indicative questions.

EXPECTED BENEFITS

It is expected that this project will not benefit you directly. However, it may benefit the wider academic community in general as this project will fill a significant gap in QA literature, which now focus mainly on bigger systems; not Small States. Thus, providing a model for Small States, this could also serve as a useful reference of quality assurance in higher education for policy makers, practitioners, and professional alike.

RISKS

There are no risks beyond normal day-to-day living associated with your participation in this project.

PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

All comments and responses will be treated confidentially. The names of individual persons are not required in any of the responses.

Any data collected as part of this project will be stored securely as per QUT's Management of research data policy.

Any information obtained in connection with this project that can identify you will remain confidential. It will only be disclosed with your permission, subject to legal requirements. We plan to publically present and publish the results of this research; however information will only be provided in a form that does not identify you.]

The transcript of interviews will be provided for verification by the participants prior to final inclusion. Audio recordings of interviews and moderation meetings will be transcribed and used by the researcher only for the purposes of this project, and will be secured in a safe location accessible only to the researcher. The participants will have the opportunity to verify their comments and responses prior to final inclusion. The audio recordings will be destroyed after at the end of the project. Only the researcher will have access to the audio recording.

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

Once you understand what the project is about, and if you agree to participate, I ask that you sign the Consent Form (enclosed) to confirm your agreement to participate.

QUESTIONS / FURTHER INFORMATION ABOUT THE PROJECT

If have any questions or require any further information about the project please contact the researcher named below.

Abdul Hannan Waheed, PhD student

Centre for Learning Innovation

Faculty of Education

0415855903 (Australia), +960 776372 (Maldives)

a.waheed@student.qut.edu.au

CONCERNS / COMPLAINTS REGARDING THE CONDUCT OF THE PROJECT

QUT is committed to research integrity and the ethical conduct of research projects. However, if you do have any concerns or complaints about the ethical conduct of the project (approval number: XXXXXXX) you may contact the QUT Research Ethics Unit on [+61 7] 3138 5123 or email ethicscontact@qut.edu.au. The QUT Research Ethics Unit is not connected with the research project and can facilitate a resolution to your concern in an impartial manner.

Thank you for helping with this research project. Please keep this sheet for your information.

Queensland University of Technology
Brisbane Australia

CONSENT FORM FOR QUT RESEARCH PROJECT

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

RESEARCH TEAM CONTACTS

Abdul Hannan Waheed

Centre for Learning Innovation, Faculty of Education

Phone

a.waheed@student.qut.edu.au

STATEMENT OF CONSENT

By signing below, you are indicating that you:

- have read and understood the information document regarding this project
- have had any questions answered to your satisfaction
- understand that if you have any additional questions you can contact the research team
- understand that you are free to withdraw at any time, without comment or penalty
- understand that you can contact the Research Ethics Unit on [+61 7] 3138 5123 or email ethicscontact@qut.edu.au if you have concerns about the ethical conduct of the project
- understand that the project will include [audio and/or video] recording
- understand that non-identifiable data collected in this project may be used as comparative data in future projects
- agree to participate in the project

Name .....

Signature .....

Date .....

MEDIA RELEASE PROMOTIONS

From time to time, we may like to promote our research to the general public through, for example, newspaper articles. Would you be willing to be contacted by QUT Media and Communications for possible inclusion in such stories? By ticking this box, it only means you are choosing to be contacted – you can still decide at the time not to be involved in any promotions.

☐ Yes, you may contact me about inclusion in promotions

☐ No, I do not wish to be contacted about inclusion in promotions

Please return this sheet to the investigator.