

# **Grounding a Regional Higher Education Research Agenda in Real Challenges**

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## **Biography for Dr. Alvin Ashton**

Dr Ashton is a Higher Education Consultant, Deputy Chairman of the Accreditation Council of Trinidad and Tobago (ACTT) and a member of the National Curriculum Council. His background is in Foreign Language Education and Curriculum and Instruction. Dr Ashton has contributed significantly to these fields as well as to the development of higher education and in particular Accreditation and Quality Assurance at the tertiary level nationally and regionally.

Dr Ashton joined the National Institute of Higher Education, Research, Science and Technology (NIHERST) in 1979 as a Research Officer in the then fledgling Higher Education division of this institution. He subsequently became Dean of Higher Education and then Vice President for Higher Education, a post that he held until his retirement in 2001.

Dr Ashton has been on the ground floor of major national and regional initiatives in tertiary education and has made presentations and published in the fields of quality assurance, tertiary education policy, seamlessness in education in Trinidad and Tobago as well as curriculum reform in Foreign Language Education and the professionalisation of the field. He is the author of the seminal document "Towards a Regional Accreditation Model" which serves as the basis for the proposed regional accreditation system.

Dr Ashton has been extensively involved in the expansion of the tertiary education sector and is closely associated with the introduction of the Community College concept in Trinidad and Tobago having served as Chairman of the first Community College Committee in 1985 and subsequently as Chairman of the College of Science, Technology and Applied Arts of Trinidad and Tobago (COSTAATT) Implementation Team which was responsible for the planning and establishment of COSTAATT. He was also involved in the establishment of the Association of Tertiary Institutions of Trinidad and Tobago (ATITT) and served two terms as President.

The leaders of the Accreditation and Quality Assurance thrust are in general those countries with mature higher education systems structurally and administratively.

Areas of professional specialisation:

- Policy development and analyse
- Quality in Higher Education
- Teaching and learning in higher education
- Foreign Language Education

# Grounding A Regional Higher Education Research Agenda in Real Challenges

**Dr. Alvin Ashton**

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**ABSTRACT:** In Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* a character says something to the effect that "once I give something a name it is that". In Trinidad and Tobago and in many other countries in CARICOM the range of terminology with system currency in the sector, for example, tertiary/higher, post secondary and even further, reminds one of the meaning and analysis used by Carroll's character. This approach eschews in-depth systemic analysis of characteristic

To expand on the phenomenon of "naming" in higher education, use of the term higher education system in the local context is usually taken to mean that a higher education system with the attendant characteristics of a coherent higher education system is actually in place. While it can be argued that all systems are in a developmental stage, effectively meeting the challenges of expansion, equity and quality in higher education necessitates in-depth understanding of the embryonic nature of the higher systems at both the national and regional levels in CARICOM.

In Trinidad and Tobago, the coordination and structuring of the higher education sector is still a work in progress. The focus in the presentation will be on some of the key sector characteristics that have a direct bearing on the expansion of access as well as equity and quality imperatives in higher education such governance, system coherence and administration, policy and policy formulation as well as accountability and accreditation.

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It is widely recognised that cultural factors significantly influence educational developments including the adoption of systems to ensure quality in educational provision and in the overall coordination and management of the sector. The influence of culture can be seen, for example, in the American approach to accreditation which accords a central role to higher education institutions and professional bodies as opposed to state or government bodies playing the dominant role. This approach which informs the accreditation and quality assurance models that are being introduced in CARICOM is based on a traditional American fear of having too much government in the affairs of citizens. Another example of the influence of culture and history in shaping higher education systems is in Central America. There the history of confrontation

between universities and government has given rise to similar concerns about the need for external quality assurance bodies to be as independent as possible of the state.

In Central America, the quality assurance body has autonomy over its operations and comprises a regional council that establishes criteria to be used by national evaluation and accreditation bodies as implementing agencies. Those involved in the accreditation thrust in CARICOM both at the national and regional levels are likely to immediately spot the differences in the two approaches.

These differences in cultural contexts according to Woodhouse (1984) are largely responsible for the differences in Quality Assurance practice internationally with particular reference to the relationship between External Quality Assurance Agencies (EQAS) and higher education institutions and the state. The impact of culture on higher education extends beyond external quality assurance to encompass critical areas such as governance, accountability, stakeholder participation, management of the sector, and policy formulation.

In this country and the rest of the region in the understandable haste to transform our economic and social realities and short circuit the development process, there is the tendency to import higher education models systems and accompanying rhetoric without a full appreciation and understanding of where we actually are in terms of system development and supportive infrastructure for the coherent and orderly development of tertiary education. A major consequence of this shortcoming is that the large number of discrete interventions and projects all conceptualised and conceived independently of each other generally do not have a positive cumulative impact on the system.

### **Is our Higher Education System British?**

In the United Kingdom from which much of the Anglophone regional educational practice comes, there has been something of a revolution in tertiary education over the past four decades. This revolution is still in progress particularly in the effort to create a “mass” system of tertiary education informed by the principle of public accountability with its connotations of external control and the comprehensive, complex and substantial set of activities and relationships associated with quality improvement. It is in this context that the joint planning committee for

quality assurance in the UK stated explicitly that the prime responsibility of the new Quality Assurance in the UK should be ... “to support higher education institutions in discharging their responsibility for the maintenance and improvement of the quality and standards of their educational provision”. This position was articulated by the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals in the UK.

In this country and the region as a whole, the tertiary institutions in the various countries in the regional body the Association of Caribbean Tertiary Institutions (ACTI) and most professional bodies on the whole are not yet in a position where they can effectively partner with the state in charting the course of tertiary education in the region. Influence and power in this regard rest disproportionately with the state, a development which if not addressed is likely to lead to a non-inclusive and non-participatory approach to higher education policy, planning, management and governance becoming distinctive characteristics of high education in the region.

### **Central Role of the Tertiary Level Institutions (TLIs) in Quality Improvement**

The regional strategy for addressing tertiary level accreditation must be based on the critical importance of the TLIs. However, it is necessary to recognise that many TLIs do need considerable assistance to effect the changes required for improvement. This situation has far reaching implications for accreditation, quality assurance and the ability of tertiary institutions to make a significant contribution to the increased competitiveness of the workforce and the achievement of the much talked about developed society goals.

Randall and Roberts in their Report on the “Regional Quality Assurance Project”, 2003, identify the need for TLIs to build capacity to handle quality assurance issues in their institution as a major challenge. They maintain that; “For the Community Colleges and comparable institutions, there is a need to develop capacity and eventually expertise in the procedures of curriculum and assessment design”. Hitherto they point out, “... the bulk of their provision has taken the form of programmes specified by others. In some cases the specification has come from an awarding body, such as the Caribbean Examinations Council, the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (Cambridge ‘A’ levels), or the City & Guilds of London Institute. In others, it arises from a franchise arrangement with the University of the West Indies or other Universities. In others, the specification comes from a body responsible for setting standards of

entry to a profession such as teaching or nursing". In a responsive and diverse higher education system it is expected that a greater proportion of provision will become the responsibility of the Colleges as more Associate and Bachelor's Degrees are designed and developed. Colleges may well find that bodies that now specify programmes may in future allow greater freedom to providers to design aspects of programmes including curriculum and assessment themselves.

### **The Need For Higher Education Infrastructural Development**

It is widely recognised that one of the characteristics of the higher education systems in Trinidad and Tobago is the laissez faire approach to important areas such as admission requirements, courses and programme structures, including required units for credits for completion, absence of clarity as to what constitutes full and part time study, weak coordination of the sector, as well as lack of consensus in the use of terminology. Tertiary/Higher Education in Trinidad and Tobago and the region the tertiary education system is still according to Hopkin (2004) in evolving form with developmental challenges particular to this stage.

The need for comprehensive and effective coordination and management of the sector has frequently been cited as a prerequisite for quality improvement and accountability in the sector. National or state authorities in some jurisdictions are responsible for developing policies that determine admission and retention standards at institutions comprising a national or state system of higher education. Establishing such patterns is being recognised more and more as within the realm of national tertiary education policy. It also has a direct bearing on the whole quality challenge.

### **Governance**

The governing body (often called a board or council) has the overall responsibility for the institution. It is responsible for ensuring that business is conducted with probity and integrity, for strategic and financial planning, for overall policies on staffing and resources and for monitoring the performance of the institution. Most if all of the public TLIs in this country have boards. However, their role in the ngthening of institutions and collectively in the development of a quality culture in the region is yet to be given the attention it deserves. The cultural factor is also present here as there is wide recognition that the means by which institutions of higher

education within a state can be appropriately governed depend partly on historical tradition, partly on political strength and compromise, and partly on sound principles of organisation.

The challenge is to obtain through organisational structure and assignment of responsibilities a desired balance between the aims of coordination at the national level and governance at the institutional level. The higher education challenges outlined in this paper are indeed formidable. In order to effectively address them they must be situated within a coherent research agenda to inform the necessary reforms which must be effected in the sector.

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