It gives me great pleasure to be present on the occasion of the University Council of Jamaica Awards Function and I warmly commend the UCJ on its various initiatives to enhance the quality of tertiary education in the country. I bring to you greetings from my colleagues at our headquarters in Vancouver and our regional office in New Delhi.

Quality in education is a growing concern across the Commonwealth where governments have made impressive gains in increasing access to education at all levels. However, increased access has not necessarily led to improved learning outcomes. As such, most Commonwealth countries have established QA and accreditation bodies—44 countries have councils, commissions and authorities which cater to the QA needs of tertiary education institutions. The last ten years have witnessed a phenomenal increase in the number of quality assurance agencies.

Judith Eaton, the President of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation in the US, notes two influences on QA during this period—one, that the QA systems were developed in the Western world and these were followed by the developing world; and two, the QA systems were based on traditional HE which was primarily classroom based and faculty dominated. How can QA systems be more contextual and open to new types of HE provision?

In addition to national QA agencies, there has been a substantial increase in the number of regional and international QA networks in the last decade. The Caribbean Area Network for QA in Tertiary Education (CANQATE), African Quality Assurance Network, the European Association for QA in Higher Education or ENQA, are some of the regional entities that now link with country-based QA systems. The increasing mobility of students across borders and the growth of online learning will further strengthen international QA initiatives.

Another development supporting student mobility is the number of Qualifications Frameworks which have been developed in over 70 countries. For example, Europe has both national and regional frameworks. Australia, Hong Kong and New Zealand have national frameworks. (Eaton, 2012)

In the past decade, we have witnessed the growing prominence of rankings, a hierarchical comparison of the effectiveness of different institutions according to specific indicators. More than 50 countries use rankings and there are 10 international and some regional rankings (Eaton, 2012). How many of our Commonwealth universities feature in the top twenty?
During this period, we have also witnessed the increased emphasis on outcomes. The Association of American Colleges and Universities summarized the essential learning outcomes for college graduates and these can be adopted and adapted by institutions. The OECD’s Assessment of Higher Learning Outcomes (AHELO) can be used by countries to test generic and discipline based skills.

To sum up the developments of the past decade, we have seen a move towards greater accountability and regulation. There is an increasing trend towards the regionalization and internationalization of QA; there is a focus on outcomes—for institutions as well as for students. Fortunately, there are more tools available now than ever before, to measure outcomes, rankings, and to compare different institutions.

COL has kept pace with these developments and has taken some key initiatives in this area. The COL approach has been threefold: to influence policy at national and institutional levels through advocacy, to develop and share resources and to build the capacity of institutions and individuals to offer better quality education.

COL continues its advocacy efforts to establish that distance learning and campus providers have the same purpose that all institutions serve. COL has developed several QA Toolkits including one for Higher Education as well as a QA micro-site with free resources.

COL has developed a Review and Improvement Model (COLRIM), which helps institutions to assess their respective practices as a step towards external accreditation or as an ongoing process of continuous self-improvement. It is a low-cost ‘do-it-yourself’ model which does not require a panel of external experts but engages internal staff. It involves developing systemic thinking and organizational learning; and focuses on capacity building.

Under the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth, (VUSSC) initiative, of which Jamaica is a member, COL has developed a Transnational Qualifications Framework which has become a model for the CARICOM Qualifications Framework. All these resources are available free and can be accessed from COL’s website.

In conclusion, let me leave you with three questions. Based on the emerging trends, will QA agencies of the future need to provide more facilitation rather than regulation? Will future QA seek less compliance and encourage more creativity? Do we see the focus of QA shifting from Higher Education to Lifelong Learning?

On that note, let me wish the QA Week every possible success.