

**Quality Assurance in Higher Education
In the Commonwealth Caribbean**

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QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE COMMONWEALTH CARIBBEAN

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Notions of quality vary from that of providing a distinctive, special or even exclusive product or service, to meeting or conforming to predetermined specifications or standards, to value for money or to fitness for purpose. As (Whiteley 2001) observed, however quality is defined, quality assurance in education has become an all-embracing concept that includes all policies, processes and actions through which the quality of the education provided is developed and maintained.

There are two great and widely used systems of quality assurance in higher education. First is the system of certification of students by a renowned scholar in the field. This system is of historic vintage and is as old as higher education itself. The value of the credential awarded was mainly assured not only by the reputation of the scholar but also by his place in the genealogical succession of established scholarship in the field. In more recent times this brand of quality assurance has evolved into one of internal and external peer review of the student performance and of the advancement of scholars within the academy. The other system, which could also trace its roots back to the same historic vintage, is that of accreditation of institutions or of professional programmes. The emphasis of the accreditation system is that of meeting input standards in such areas as curriculum, library facilities, staff qualifications, student entry qualifications, duration of study etc. Neither system is mutually exclusive. Further, the current tendency is for both approaches to move closer to each other, that is, to become more ecumenical, and for features of one to be grafted into the other.

In the main, the Commonwealth Caribbean has followed the peer review and internal and external examination tradition. This is not only true in higher education but also at the secondary level. Starting in the 1870s and continuing for just over one hundred years, the output standards of high school education in the Commonwealth Caribbean were set by school leaving examining bodies of Cambridge and London Universities. Beginning in 1979 the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC) was established and has replaced the General Certificate of Education (GCE) Ordinary level, of both Cambridge and London. In the latter half of the 1990s, the Caribbean Advanced Proficiency Examination (CAPE) has been introduced by CXC to replace the Cambridge and London GCE Advanced level. The point is that the quality of secondary education in the Commonwealth Caribbean is assured by way of an external examination that all secondary school students in this sub-region sit at the end of the secondary cycle of education. Entry to tertiary institutions is defined in terms of successful performance in these examinations that are external to secondary schools.

A BRIEF SKETCH OF THE HISTORY OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE COMMONWEALTH CARIBBEAN

The subject of quality assurance in higher education in the Commonwealth Caribbean cannot be meaningfully addressed outside the context of the development of the higher educational institutions in the sub-region. In this regard it is important to note from the outset that the history

of higher education in the Commonwealth Caribbean has followed a very different course from that of Latin America.

While the British West Indian colonies had a history of elementary and secondary education which paralleled that of the industrialised world, and while they always had levels of enrolment at the elementary level that were comparable to North America and Western Europe, and always had enrolments at the elementary level higher than that of the colonies of Spain, the British West Indian colonies were late starters in the inauguration and development of tertiary and higher education. Universities were established very early in the settlement of the Spanish colonies. (Sherlock and Nettleford, 1990) noted that in the first half of the seventeenth century, the Spanish established the universities of Santo Domingo, Mexico and Lima. In the second half of the seventeenth century, Spain established five more universities in its New World colonies and followed this with the founding of another ten universities over the course of the eighteenth century. By the beginning of the nineteenth century there were twenty universities operating in Spanish America.

The North American colonies founded colleges very soon after schools were established. Harvard College was founded in 1636, William and Mary in 1693, Yale in 1701, Princeton in 1746, Kings College in 1754, and Pennsylvania in 1755, Rutgers in 1766, Brown in 1765 and Dartmouth in 1769. Nine colleges had been founded in the North American colonies before the declaration of American independence in 1776. In contrast, up to the end of the eighteenth century, not a single college had been established in the West Indian colonies. It was not until 1830, nearly two hundred years after the founding of Harvard and over three hundred years after the founding of the University of Santo Domingo in 1515, when the Codrington Grammar School was transformed into a theological college, that the first tertiary institution was established in the Commonwealth Caribbean. In other words, schools were founded in the Commonwealth Caribbean and operated for more than two hundred years before a single college was established in the sub-region.

It was only in the first half of the nineteenth century that colleges began to be established in the Commonwealth Caribbean. Even then it was only theological and teachers colleges that made their entrance. These institutions were founded to train 'native' teachers and clergy. In this regard Codrington College in Barbados offering theological education and Mico College in Jamaica training teachers were pioneers in the establishment of tertiary education in this sub-region. Codrington was the only college to offer degrees, which they did after 1835 in conjunction with Durham University in Wales. Up to the middle of the twentieth century, tertiary education in the Commonwealth Caribbean was almost entirely limited to theological and teacher education. The Imperial College of Agriculture in Trinidad was the sole exception.

Most tertiary education institutions in the Commonwealth Caribbean can trace their origins to the post-war or post-independence periods. The democratisation of political power with the advent of adult suffrage and representative government in the 1940s together with the movement from colonialism to national sovereignty brought substantial developments within tertiary education in the region. The imperative to expand tertiary education came from the anticipated demand for local leaders, professionals and technocrats in the newly emerging nation-states and semi-autonomous dependencies.

The major developments in higher education in the Commonwealth Caribbean since the mid 1940s can be listed and summarised briefly as follows:

- ? The establishment of university education within the sub-region beginning with the founding of the University of the West Indies (UWI) in 1948. UWI is a regional university funded by fourteen Governments of the Commonwealth Caribbean.
- ? The founding University of Guyana in 1963.
- ? The establishment of the University Council of Jamaica in 1988 with a mandate to award degrees through programmes offered in Jamaican tertiary institutions.
- ? The upgrading of the College of Arts, Science and Technology to the University of Technology in 1995.
- ? The upgrading of the College of the Bahamas to a four-year degree granting institution in 1996.
- ? The upgrading of West Indies College in Jamaica to Northern Caribbean University in 1997.
- ? The creation of the University of Belize from five national tertiary institutions in 2000.

The Commonwealth Caribbean now has seven institutions of higher education all established in the last 54 years.

THE GENERIC PATTERN OF QUALITY ASSURANCE

In order to highlight recent developments in quality assurance in higher education in the Commonwealth Caribbean, it is probably most appropriate to briefly describe the generic pattern that was established in the 1950s and 1960s. The principal elements of the generic quality assurance mechanism were:

1. The Academic Board of the University comprised of senior academics, which approves the curriculum of all programmes and courses after they have been scrutinised by the respective Faculty Boards.
2. The Board of Examiners of each Faculty that is responsible for the setting and marking of all examinations of their respective Faculties.
3. The Appointment and Promotions Committee that is responsible for the appointment and promotion of the academic staff.

The philosophy and practice associated with all three elements are rooted and grounded in peer review. The Academic Board exists to ensure that prior to their approval, all programmes and courses that are offered in the University are scrutinised not only by the particular Faculty from which they originate but by senior scholars from across the entire University. The Board of Examiners of each faculty operates to ensure that all examinations from the setting of the papers to the marking of the students' responses to processing of the marks awarded, are subject to both internal and external peer review. Accordingly, there is an internal examiner and an external examiner who vets all examination papers set, and first marker, second marker and external examiner who all mark the students' responses to ensure standards and impartiality. The Appointments and Promotions Committee has as its remit the responsibility to ensure that all appointments into the University and all promotions of staff meet predetermined standards and criteria as judged by peer internal and external to the University.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN QUALITY ASSURANCE AT THE UWI

Recent developments in quality assurance in higher education are best illustrated by reference to changes taking place in UWI since the middle of the 1990s. As the oldest operating higher education institution in the Commonwealth Caribbean, the attempts at UWI to enhance and improve the generic pattern of quality assurance that marked its founding define the broad contours of the challenges being addressed by all higher education institutions in the sub-region regardless of age.

The Chancellor's Commission on Governance in 1994 mandated the development and implementation of an augmented system of quality audit and assurance at UWI, a decision that reflected worldwide trends in the higher education sector. The new mechanism established to implement the updated system of quality assurance was the Board for Undergraduate Studies (BUS), which began its work in 1996.

At the outset, BUS recognised and left in place the several mechanisms that were already in place at UWI to secure and maintain desirable quality in its academic work. These included, for example, systems for course and programme approval, procedures for obtaining student feedback on courses, the use of External Examiners in several faculties and the establishment of an Instructional Development Unit on each campus. Within a broader thrust to enhance the quality of all of its operations, UWI has developed a process of quality assurance that has the primary aim of raising the quality of the learning experience of the undergraduate and postgraduate students at the university. An important part of this is the periodic review of the curriculum and teaching of the different disciplines.

The understanding of quality adopted by UWI for its reviews is one of *fitness for purpose*, the 'definition' of quality adopted by many policy makers in the higher education sector. The intention is to relate quality to the purpose of the service provided. Quality is then judged in terms of the extent to which a product or service meets its stated purposes. This allows decisions as to the aims and objectives of the teaching of a discipline, the content of programmes and courses, teaching methods, assessment practices, etc. to reside with the teaching staff, while an evaluation of the results may be performed by others.

The main elements of the augmented and enhanced system of quality assurance at UWI can be described briefly as follows.

The Student Charter

The Charter of Principles and Responsibilities (the Student Charter) outlines what a student at UWI might reasonably expect from the University. The University has a policy of being student-centred and student-friendly and this policy informs all of its procedures and imposes other specific demands. The Student Charter sets out the rights of UWI students to the resources, in the broadest sense, necessary for the attainment of their learning objectives.

The Student Charter also argues that the rights and privileges accorded to its students go hand in hand with corresponding duties, obligations and responsibilities noting that the student is responsible for his/her own learning, for observing the academic and non-academic regulations and for adhering to the schedule of dates. Thus the Student Charter makes clear that the student is central in ensuring the maintenance of the excellence in the work of the University.

UWI Quality Assurance Review Process

Reviews are undertaken of the teaching of the different disciplines at the university in a five-year cycle. These reviews are quite separate from the assessment, for renewal of contract or promotion, of individual members of staff, which is the responsibility of the Campus or University Appointments Committee. The quality assurance review system at UWI is of a formative nature with a primary aim of raising the quality of the learning experience provided.

The review process begins with a member of BUS staff visiting the campus and having discussions with the Head of Department or Section and the academic staff. This visit is designed to orient the staff to the purposes and procedures of the review, provide an opportunity for questions, ensure that the purpose of the Self Assessment is clear and allow for discussion on discipline-specific issues.

The Review Team is then appointed with usually a representative from the same discipline on another campus and two or three independent members, that is, one or two senior academics from outside the region and a professional with expertise in the area, usually from the Caribbean but external to UWI.

A key element within the review process is a Self Assessment, undertaken by the academic staff that teaches the discipline, which takes place in the months before the review. A handbook has been published to guide members of staff in conducting the Self Assessment. The Review Team will consider the report of the Self Assessment, along with other documentation and information. The overall aim of the Self Assessment is to examine the Aims and Objectives of the teaching of the discipline, describe the provision and outcomes and to determine the extent to which the Aims and Objectives are being realised.

The Review Team visits the campus for four to five days to test the validity of the Self Assessment and to gather further evidence. During the visit the Review Team has meetings with academic staff, undergraduate and postgraduate students, graduates of the programmes, employers of graduates and faculty and campus management personnel. The team also inspects relevant facilities and observes teaching sessions. A draft report is developed on the final day.

The team provides oral feedback to the academic staff and its written report is distributed widely. As a result of the Self Assessment and the report of the Review Team, the members of academic staff identify issues for further consideration. The Head of a department or section reports on action taken following the review to Faculty Board, which reports on to the campus Academic Board. A year later, the department reports to BUS and the Board for Graduate Studies and Research (BGSR) outlining the activities that have occurred.

The Quality Audit

At times it is useful to a department or faculty for a quality audit to be done of the Quality Assurance procedures that are in place, in that department or faculty, to determine whether the procedures are adequate to assure quality. Quality Audits are conducted by BUS on an 'in-house' basis to as full as extent as possible; reference is made to external experts as required.

The following are important elements of formal quality assurance procedures:

- (i) Publication of a set of clearly-defined aims and objectives and the systematic and effective monitoring of the achievement of these aims and objectives
- (ii) Monitoring of the student learning experience, including teaching/learning methods
- (iii) Collection and use of student feedback
- (iv) Collection and use of quantitative data on student performance
- (v) Collection and use of external opinion
- (vi) Rapid responses to issues identified
- (vii) Appropriate and effective orientation arrangements for all new staff
- (viii) Systematic approaches to identifying the training needs of all staff and the participation of staff in development activities
- (ix) Systematic documentation of involvement in Quality Assurance procedures.

BUS requires that the Quality Assurance procedures in a department be fully documented in order to demonstrate that they are appropriate and adequate. Overall, the Quality Assurance handbook of the Department should show clearly that all aspects of the department's provision are evaluated and improved on a continuous basis.

Documentation required by UWI for an internal Quality Audit

Aims/Objectives/Provision

1. Statements of aims and objectives of the Department/Faculty/University
2. Department/Campus/University Strategic Plans
3. Department and faculty handbooks
4. Up-to-date course outlines
5. Annual departmental reports

Course/Programme Development

6. Reports of the proposal procedure for new courses/programmes
7. Minutes of curriculum/course review committee meetings – departmental and/or *ad hoc* committees

Staff Meetings

8. Minutes of departmental staff meetings/subject committees
9. Minutes of support staff/technical staff meetings
10. Minutes of Faculty Board meetings

Student Feedback

11. Statement of student participation in committees/boards of department/Faculty
12. Minutes of staff/student liaison committee meetings and evidence of the Responses to students concern raised
13. Student course assessment data
14. Student statistics (throughput rates, course pass rates, grade distributions, retention rates, numbers in each class of degrees awarded, etc) along with evidence of their use in monitoring the teaching/learning process

Graduate Destination Data

15. Reports on destination data of graduates

External Opinion

16. Reports of surveys of graduates
17. Reports of surveys of employers
18. Reports of University Examiners and/or External Examiners and responses of department and Faculty to these reports

Staffing and Staff Development

19. Departmental staff listing
20. Reports of annual academic staff appraisals by Head of Department
21. Reports on performance of technical staff both individually and as group
22. Evidence of implementation of staff development policies, including the processes to identify staff needs, including part-time staff
23. Evidence of the participation of staff in developmental activities, including those related to the teaching and assessment of students.

Quality Assurance

24. Departmental/Faculty Quality Assurance handbook
25. Minutes of meetings with OBUS and other evidence of involvement in Quality Assurance procedures.

More generally, BUS proposes and reviews mechanisms for ensuring quality in the operations of the University, conducts periodic audits of these mechanisms and follows up trails that emerge for further study. BUS also conducts Quality Audits into the operation of other aspects of UWI such as the summer school, distance education provision, the libraries and so on.

Stakeholder Feedback

An important element of all Quality Assurance Systems in universities is the consideration of feedback and opinion from stakeholders in the institution. UWI has formal procedures and representational structures that allow the receipt of comment from students, graduates, employers and the regional governments. This supplements the indirect feedback that is received by members of staff by their analysis of coursework and of examination results.

Comments on the teaching and the academic programmes are collected in several ways. At the end of each course the students complete a course evaluation instrument. The campus administration collates the data from the instruments and the Head of Department and the member of staff concerned then return the summarised data for consideration. Staff/Student Liaison Committees are established in each department (or, sometimes, on a faculty-wide basis) and these committees meet regularly to consider pedagogy, curriculum, assessment methods and other issues that impact on the student learning experience.

There is formal student representation on bodies at all levels of the University, including the Faculty Boards, the Academic Boards, the Campus Councils, the Boards of the University Centre, the Senate, the Strategy Committee and the Council. Graduates of UWI are also represented through the Guild of Graduates. The nature and degree of the formal contact with industry or employers of UWI graduates varies, being to an extent dependent on the nature of the discipline taught within a particular department or Faculty. For instance, the Faculty of Engineering has regular and extensive contact with the engineering industry. Many departments invite comment from related organisations at regular intervals.

BUS also conducts periodic surveys of the opinions of graduates and employers of the work of UWI. The significance of the importance and value of stakeholder feedback has been documented in the results of these surveys. The first formal survey, conducted in ten non-campus countries (NCCs), arose out of the need to ascertain from employers whether UWI graduates meet the demands and expectations of regional institutions. The report, *How Employers View Our Graduates: The Non-Campus Countries Perspective (1998)*, highlighted the perceived strengths and weaknesses of UWI graduates. A survey of UWI graduates was conducted in the same countries. Research in areas such as this is an important part of the quality exercise as the University strives to remain relevant and responsive to regional needs.

Quality Assurance in Articulation Agreements

UWI has an active commitment to collaborate with other Tertiary Level Institutions (TLIs) in the region in an effort to achieve a common goal of widening access to tertiary education across the region. UWI has transferred to TLIs many of the Certificate and Diploma courses that it previously delivered. UWI also now franchises the teaching of selected first and second year UWI Bachelor's degree programmes to certain TLIs, with the students being expected to transfer to a campus to complete the degree after the successful completion of the courses at the TLI.

In some cases UWI now admits students from programmes developed in a TLI directly into its own degree programmes. This usually involves Associate Degrees and these degrees have been developed in many of the TLIs. Some Associate Degrees have been assessed by UWI and graduates of approved programmes granted matriculation status. In a smaller number of cases a graduate of a TLI Associate Degree, at a prescribed level, is allowed directly into the second year of a related UWI degree programme. Associate Degrees have the advantage of being specifically relevant to the country. Further they are a terminal qualification, if the student wishes, as well as allowing the possibility of continuing at UWI. These arrangements allow access to education at lower cost.

The responsibility for establishing and managing these articulation agreements lies with the Tertiary Level Institutions Unit (TLIU), which reports to the Board for Non-Campus Countries and Distance Education (BNCC&DE). The TLIU has developed and published procedures for assessing:

- (i) Associate Degree programmes and
- (ii) The ability of a TLI to adequately deliver UWI programmes and BUS and OBUS are integral parts of these procedures.

When an articulation agreement is being considered between a faculty at UWI and a regional TLI, the quality assurance mechanism has a clearly different purpose from the internal quality assurance process. The faculty is attempting to establish whether the TLI is of at least the minimum standard to deliver the programme. Quality assurance in this context is evaluative and judgmental, rather than formative, although some form of 'pre-review' in the period leading up to a formal review may be useful to the TLI and have a developmental purpose. If deficiencies are found, however, the UWI team will make suggestions as to how they may be addressed.

When a TLI expresses an interest in having its Associate Degree programme assessed by UWI, or a desire to teach some of UWI's courses or programmes, the procedures approved by BNCC&DE are followed. The Chair, BNCC&DE consults the Chair, BUS, and the TLIU may then be directed to pursue the request. The TLIU holds discussions with the relevant Deans who identify Faculty Assessment teams. These teams assess the written course information provided by the TLI and may then visit the TLI to assess the college's resources, in collaboration with TLIU and BUS. Faculty recommendations, along with comments from BUS, are reported to BNCC&DE. This board, in consultation with BUS, approves the nature of the articulation agreement to be pursued. A review at

a TLI leads to a recommendation as to whether the programme is appropriate for normal matriculation or for advanced placement. In the event that a recognised national body has accredited the programmes, this process may be waived. BUS also collaborates with the BNCC&DE in defining and reviewing UWI policy in respect of undergraduate and sub-degree programmes offered at TLIs.

CONCLUDING COMMENT

A close look at recent developments in quality assurance at UWI clearly shows the retention of the peer review and external examination system but also the grafting onto that system several elements that are characteristic of systems of accreditation. For example, self-assessment is not an integral part of quality assurance at UWI.

The point is that while the time available to prepare this paper did not allow for a survey of all higher education institutions in the Commonwealth Caribbean it is accurate to say that most of the institutions, with the possible exception of the University of Belize, has opted for the peer review and external examination model of quality assurance along with the grafting of some of the standard elements of accreditation systems. As such, most Caribbean higher education institutions are using hybrid systems of quality assurance with a bias towards peer review of staff and student achievement.

In large measure, therefore, the quality assurance systems of the Commonwealth Caribbean still operates mainly within the academic community of the British Commonwealth although increasingly links are being established with the academic community of the Americas.

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