

THE IMPERATIVE OF QUALITY ASSURANCE FOR CARIBBEAN TERTIARY LEVEL INSTITUTIONS

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Introduction

Perspectives on quality and standards in the tertiary education sector vary and concern expressed about a perceived lowering of quality and standards in the sector results from a range of factors. They include the expansion of the sector, rising costs, the relevance of the programmes, the standards of the graduates and competition from other institutions.

Expansion: In the Caribbean the CARICOM governments' target of 15% of the age cohort in tertiary education by 2005 means that greater access to such education has become an important item on the political agenda. The reaching of this target is expected to help towards greater economic advancement in the region by the provision of appropriately trained persons for the work force. Some commentators, however, have suggested that expansion of the sector leads naturally to a lowering of quality and standards.

Costs and efficiency: The costs of tertiary education have risen significantly and it is questioned whether the sector is giving good value for money and using its resources efficiently. As one consequence some educational institutions have attempted to raise the rate of throughput of students, as governments and other funding agencies usually consider greater numbers of graduates as indicative of greater efficiency.

Standards and relevance: The 'improved efficiency' demanded, however, may be associated with pressures to lower the standards of the qualifications awarded. It has been suggested that the standards reached by students graduating from certain programmes is lower than in the past. The relevance of the programmes provided by regional Tertiary Level Institutions (TLIs) to current societal and/or personal needs has also been questioned.

Competition: It is relatively recently that some effects of globalisation on educational provision have become clearer. There is now a 'global village', where physical territorial boundaries between nation states are effectively disappearing, and this is highlighted in the context of tertiary education by the growth of Distance Education, both on the Internet and otherwise. Caribbean institutions now compete for students, both amongst themselves and, increasingly, with the offers of programmes from extra-regional colleges and universities. Further, there is often a perception that qualifications from outside the region are of a higher standard than those from within, which leads to further pressures on the regional institutions.

As a consequence of the above it is now a reasonable view that the survival of the regional colleges and universities depends upon an overt commitment to a culture of quality.

Developments in Dominica

Institutional development

A Task Force to consider the development of the tertiary education sector in Dominica was set up in 1990 and presented its report in 1994. The report called for an amalgamation of the following: the Academic Studies Division, the Technical Studies Division, the Teachers' Training College, the School of Nursing and the Division of Continuing Studies. It further proposed that a Hospitality Division should be created. It was suggested that the

new college could work under a Board of Governors, with a Principal and Deans of Divisions. This structure would be an important change as currently the institutions fall administratively under the Ministry of Education.

In 2000 two education consultants were asked to carry out a consultancy review for the Ministry of Education. At the time of writing this paper (November 2000) it was not clear when their report would be presented to the Minister of Education. The consultants were given a mandate to consider institutional as well as programme development. Thus the suggestions in this paper must be somewhat tentative in the absence of the contents of the consultants' report but the main ideas should be applicable to the model eventually adopted. It will be important to ensure that there is an equivalent quality of provision across the different campuses and that the standards demanded are comparable with standards elsewhere.

Programme development

It has been suggested that Associate Degrees should replace the provision of GCE Advanced Level examinations and the Caribbean Advanced Placement Examination (CAPE) in Dominica. Associate Degrees are likely to lead to easier articulation with North American universities. UWI also accepts graduates of approved Associate Degree programmes from several regional TLIs, for matriculation into certain programmes and for advanced placement into others. Members of staff from the relevant Faculty at UWI evaluate the Associate Degrees before an articulation agreement is arranged and may be approached for advice at an earlier stage during the development of Associate Degrees, should that be useful. The Tertiary Level Institutions Unit (TLIU) at UWI has published a manual that outlines the procedures and requirements (TLIU 1998). Generally, the standards set in the Associate Degree programmes need close monitoring.

Quality in Tertiary Education

It is now generally accepted that there is need for greater transparency and increased openness and discussion of the work of TLIs, which has led to demands for the assessment of the quality of their work. Whiteley (1997) notes:

Industrial models of quality assurance are not easily adapted to the needs of the higher education sector. Customer-centred definitions are widely accepted throughout industry and commerce and imply that customer perception and opinion is the key element in defining quality of a product or service. 'Meeting the customer's needs' is often taken as a definition of quality in industry with efforts being then directed towards improving the quality of the product by modifications to suit the customers' perceived needs. This may not be a particularly suitable model in an educational setting as it is often difficult to identify who is the customer and what is the product. Is the student the customer or is it necessary to take account of parents or sponsoring employers? The 'product' provided by an educational institution is a service, which is intangible, and the production and consumption of the service often occur simultaneously.

Further, the teaching/learning process is difficult to control in the way industrial processes can be controlled. The inputs cannot be controlled to ensure they are all the same; the consumer is an important part of the input and the direct involvement of the consumer and producer are needed for 'production' to take place (194).

Interpretations of quality

A traditional idea of quality in the education sector has been that the service is *distinctive or special*. High standards are set and often considerable expense is incurred, thus putting the service out of reach of the majority. A sense of exclusivity is frequently associated with this idea of quality. Other concepts of quality include *conforming to specifications or standards, transformation, value for money and fitness for purpose* (Stone 1997, Green 1994).

Conforming to specifications is linked with industrial concepts. The specification of a product or service comprises a number of standards; quality is measured in terms of the degree to which the product or service matches the specifications. This assumes that the product or service can be defined in terms of parameters that are measurable and quantifiable. There may also be problems of interpretation as, for example, awarding of more first class degrees may indicate either the raising *or* lowering of standards.

In a *transformation* model quality is estimated in relation to identified and assessed changes that occur in the students over the time of their programme of study. Education is not seen as a service for a customer but an on-going transformation of a participant.

Governments and other funding agencies often hold a *value for money* model of quality. 'Greater efficiency' is demanded and accountability emphasised. This may lead to the use of quantitative performance indicators to assess quality. These may include: staff/student ratios, qualifications of entrants and their final examination results, the proportion of entrants completing a programme and the average time taken, the number of graduates unemployed six months after graduating, ratings of teaching and so on. Such indicators must be considered within the context of the resources available and related to the objectives of the programmes. Appropriate interpretation is important and care needed to avoid drawing unwarranted inferences and incorrectly assuming causal factors. Quantitative performance indicators are better used as data within a broader quality assessment process.

A *fitness for purpose* model relates quality to the purpose of the service provided and quality is judged in terms of the extent to which the service meets its stated purposes. This model is developmental and has been adopted by UWI for its Quality Assurance review programme. Decisions as to the purposes of the teaching of a discipline, the content of the programmes and courses, the teaching methods, the assessment practices, etc. reside with the teaching staff, while an evaluation of the results and the appropriateness of the provision and standards adopted may be performed by others. [A full account of the UWI Quality Strategy is given in two publications (OBUS 2000a, Whiteley 1999)].

Quality and standards

A useful distinction is often made between quality (of the provision, by an institution or section of an institution) and standards (of the awards from the institution). An institution's Aims are the aims of provision (the programmes/courses that are offered, the resources provided, the teaching, learning and assessment methods used and so on). The Objectives are the student learning objectives and the institution's standards are linked with learning objectives and learning outcomes.

Purposes of quality assessment

The need to assess quality in educational provision is now generally accepted but, as Clarke (2000) points out, there can be very different aims for this assessment, with these aims varying according to the perspective of the stakeholder. The purposes of the Quality Assurance system in the new college in Dominica need to be discussed and agreed (Brennan 2000). They may include:

- ensuring accountability for public funds
- informing funding decisions
- improving the quality of the provision
- stimulating competitiveness between institutions
- ensuring equivalence across campuses
- informing students, parents and employers
- allowing international comparisons
- assisting student mobility.

Regional developments in Quality Assurance

Association of Caribbean Tertiary Institutions

In 1990 the then Vice-Chancellor of UWI, Sir Alister McIntyre, led discussions resulting in the establishment of the Association of Caribbean Tertiary Institutions (ACTI). This was an important step forward and the objectives of ACTI are to:

- facilitate co-operation, collaboration and articulation among regional TLIs
- facilitate more effective use of resources in seeking to enhance access, mobility and quality in tertiary education
- assist in identifying and meeting the ongoing tertiary education needs of the region.

ACTI is to be the implementation agency for a regional mechanism for equivalency, articulation and accreditation. Some countries have established national bodies to assess qualifications and conduct quality assurance exercises and it is hoped that others will follow. Following a major project a manual outlining a regional mechanism for accreditation, equivalency and articulation has been published (ACTI 2000).

UWI and other TLIs

In recent years UWI has made greater effort to foster collaboration between itself and regional TLIs. Articulation

agreements now include the TLI being an affiliated institution or being an associated institution with a quasi-affiliation arrangement, a franchising arrangement, a validation arrangement or with matriculation status or advanced placement being granted for a TLI qualification. The TLIU has published documents to guide the process of articulation (TLIU 1998, 1997).

Work in TLIs

In September 2000 two workshops were held at colleges in Grenada and Barbados under a broader ACTI initiative. These workshops had the aim of developing a framework for quality assurance within a regional college and the resulting draft framework is to form the basis for further work.

Elements of Quality Assurance Systems

Many institutional Quality Assurance systems have elements in common, even if their purposes differ. In the Caribbean each country may also need some form of a national unit, which might have a national monitoring role and also be involved in any regional Quality Assurance mechanism that may be implemented in the coming years. This writer would argue for the adoption of an internal programme of self-assessment by regional TLIs, as this allows thorough reflection on the status and progress of the institution, even if resource constraints do not permit any external review. A self-assessment should involve the full range of issues and may be conducted on an institutional or departmental basis. [At UWI a self-assessment is conducted before a Quality Assurance review – see OBUS (2000b).]

The academic programme

The integrity of the academic programme and the examination system is central to quality in TLIs. A thorough procedure of course and programme development and approval is needed, and the continuing currency, relevance and appropriateness of the offerings must be ensured. There is also a need for a rigorously controlled examination system, with clear, published procedures and where confidentiality and impartiality is absolute and seen to be. Establishing and maintaining appropriate standards for the various qualifications is possibly the most difficult issue and external professional comment on the standards is valuable.

Entrants

A fundamental contributor to the quality of an educational institution is the entry level of its students and thus matriculation requirements require regular review. With the current pressure on institutions, from governments and the wider society, to increase enrolment numbers it is important that the entry level of students is appropriate for the programmes. Offering a broader range of programmes is preferable to reducing entry standards.

Resources

The most important resource in an academic institution is its academic staff. Staff members must be appointed after a rigorous process of evaluation of their qualifications and previous work. An annual appraisal of each member of staff should be conducted for formative and developmental purposes. The continued professional development of all members of staff is important to maintaining a high quality of provision; resources must be committed to this process. Adequate technical and administrative support must also be available.

The physical resources must be appropriate to the programmes being offered and the quality and adequacy of classrooms, laboratories, equipment, information technology provision, library holdings of books and periodicals and other learning resources should be assessed at regular intervals. Also, the budgetary allowance must be adequate for the recurrent costs of materials for teaching.

Stakeholders

Although they are the recipients of the services of the college, students also have considerable responsibility for the quality of a college's work. The rights and privileges accorded to the students go hand in hand with corresponding duties, obligations and responsibilities. There must be clear and severe penalties for plagiarism and other breaches of the regulations that threaten the integrity and image of the college.

One significant element of Quality Assurance systems is the consideration of feedback and opinion from stakeholders. Institutions must recognise an obligation to accept, understand and respond to concerns expressed and establish formal procedures and representational structures that allow the receipt of comment from students, graduates, employers, governments and other interested parties such as professional associations.

Comment on teaching and the academic programmes should be collected and considered. At the end of each course students can complete a course evaluation instrument, which will have a formative purpose. Staff/Student Liaison Committees should be established for each teaching section and meet regularly to consider pedagogy, curriculum, assessment methods, resources and other issues that impact on the student learning experience. There should also be formal student representation at all levels of the college.

The nature and degree of formal contact with industry or with employers of the college's graduates will vary, as it will depend on the nature of the subject being taught. Periodic surveys of recent graduates and employers to elicit their opinions of the work of the college should be conducted and the local needs established. Such research is important as the college strives to remain relevant and responsive to national needs

Governance and management

For Quality Assurance systems to be well accepted within institutions all aspects of the work of the institution should undergo periodic review. This should include the governance and management of the institution. The draft Quality Assurance Framework from the workshops in Grenada and Barbados outlines criteria for good governance and management against which the performance of the 'governing body' (however constituted) and the senior management might be evaluated.

Criteria suggested for members of the governing body included: the need to be representative of the community, knowledgeable about tertiary education and open and transparent in decision-making with the ability and willingness to contribute in a regular and effective way to the business of the governing body. The governing body would oversee the development of the Strategic Plan, ensuring that government, institutional and community priorities and needs were adequately reflected in the plan. The governing body must ensure that the college is appropriately organised, managed and adequately resourced and has satisfactory quality assurance, financial and audit arrangements. It should closely monitor student enrollment, retention and achievement as well as being supportive of the general welfare and development of all staff. The governing body would have a particular responsibility for the appointment, development and appraisal of the senior staff of the college.

The senior management of the college would be responsible for implementing and initiating policies agreed by the governing body and for ensuring the efficient and effective organisation and management of the work of the college. Criteria suggested in the draft framework included those concerned with the delivery of the Strategic Plan and its periodic review and others directed at the need for good communication both within the college and with stakeholders outside the college (including the marketing of the college). Further criteria noted the need for the continual monitoring of all aspects of the work of the college. The governing body would monitor the senior management's performance.

Reporting

Most educational institutions work under a broad Mission Statement from which a Strategic Plan is developed. The programmes offered should contribute in an identifiable way to the achievement of the goals of the Strategic Plan. Each division needs its own set of Aims and Objectives for its teaching. The publication of Mission Statements, Aims and Objectives and the like demands a related and thorough system of public reporting. The contents of the reports allow an institution to demonstrate how its short, medium and longer-term objectives are being achieved and stakeholders may then examine and evaluate its work and progress.

A Quality Assurance Unit

As the new college for Dominica is developed consideration should be given to the creation of a Quality Assurance Unit within the college. Its duties could incorporate:

- Encouraging and supporting Self-Assessments
- Organising Quality Assurance reviews of academic programmes
- Conducting audits of the learning environment.

These audits could include, for example:

- Staff/Student Liaison committees and other facets of student participation
- Careers advice systems
- Academic and personal tutorial systems
- Registration procedures
- Provision of information technology resources

- Operation of libraries
- Operation of laboratories
- Staff development and training

Conclusion

Guided by the changing needs of the region, the structures and academic programmes of colleges in the Caribbean are evolving and expanding and rigorous standards need to be upheld. Institutions need to ensure that their formal Quality Assurance procedures are maintained at a level that allows for the full demonstration of the high quality of their work and also encourages the continuous enhancement of that quality. The new college in Dominica has the opportunity to integrate appropriate Quality Assurance procedures into its management structures as it is established, to the benefit of all its stakeholders.

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