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Panel Presentation: A Critical Look at Key Components of The University of the West Indies Academic Quality Assurance System

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Abstract

Title: A Critical Look at Key Components of The University of the West Indies Academic Quality Assurance System

Using the Framework for Analysis of Practices in Higher Education (FAPHE) proffered by Harvey (2012), this panel will critically assess components of The UWI's academic Quality Management System (QMS), as implemented by the QAU. These components are: i) the integration of institutional research data in the self-assessment process; (ii) review team selection; (iii) quality assurance of distance and online education; and (iv) work based/experiential learning. Harvey's key principles for establishing the presence of best practices - efficiency in the use of resources, being well-documented, engagement of key stakeholders and undertaking monitoring and evaluation – will be the framework for the assessment. These principles address the administrative and management concerns of policy, leadership, human resource development and monitoring and evaluation that have been identified elsewhere as important in developing quality in higher education.

In examining these features critically, evidence will be identified for the presence of best practice or gaps that need to be closed for the System to produce superior results. A mixed methodological approach will be utilised; it involves undertaking a desk study of quality assurance review team reports from the various UWI campuses completed within the last five years, post-review evaluation instruments completed by review team members and heads of

departments, as well as policy, and strategic planning documentation of the University and the Quality Assurance Unit. For the integration of institutional research data, a comparative review will be undertaken against QA systems used in two other higher education institutions. Reference will also be made to the literature on best practice.

Key words: The University of the West Indies, quality assurance, best practices, institutional research data, online education, review team selection, work-based learning

Paper: A Critical Look at Key Components of The University of the West Indies Academic Quality Assurance System

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Introduction

The *Report on UWI Best Practices* (2012) identifies a continuum of practice in higher education ranging from “Good Practice” to “Promising Practice” to “Best Practice”. Good practices enhance institutional quality. For a practice to be recognised as Good Practice, it must be externally validated. A Promising Practice is one that has been successful in one organization with the potential for becoming a Best Practice, with long term sustainable impact. There must be an objective basis to the claim of effectiveness, and the possibility of replication in other organizations (Compassion Capital Fund National Resource Center, n.d., p. 4).

In a survey of the literature on best practices in Higher Education commissioned by The University of the West Indies, St Augustine Campus, Harvey (2012) examines some principles associated with the concept of “best”, which form part of a Framework for Analysis of Practices in Higher Education (FAPHE). She uses these principles to formulate a definition of best practice in higher education that can inform the analysis of practice internal to a tertiary education institution, external practice, the planning of initiatives that could become exemplary and the nurturing of best practice by managers. Her proposed definition of best practice for The University of the West Indies is:

an intervention, process or approach, which has contextual relevance for the University of the West Indies; is exemplary in its ability to produce superior results when assessed against the goals set and/or against similar practice in the relevant core area; engages internal and external stakeholders; is efficient in terms of resources (human, time, financial); is well documented; has utility and is recognized beyond the practice site.
(p.2)

The FAPHE underscores the importance of assessing any one practice for its contextual relevance and therefore its value in the Caribbean context of higher education. Its flexibility in terms of application therefore renders it useful for Caribbean tertiary institutions generally, but more specifically, in the area of quality assurance and enhancement. Indeed, best practice identification and dissemination are recognised by quality assurance entities globally, for example, QAA and INQAAHE. The FAPHE can serve as an important quality assurance tool, not only for UWI, but for other Caribbean tertiary institutions.

To that end, some of the elements of the FAPHE have been condensed in four criteria for the identification of best practice: efficiency in the use of resources, being well-documented, engagement of key stakeholders and undertaking monitoring and evaluation. In the case of the Open Campus, these criteria are compared with identified best practice criteria related to the online modality. The key point of overlap is stakeholder engagement. These best practice principles address the administrative and management concerns of policy, leadership, human resource development and monitoring and evaluation that have been identified in the literature on quality management as important in developing quality in higher education.

Methodology

Taking account of Harvey’s definition of best practice and the proposed FAPHE, this paper explores selected components of The UWI academic quality assurance system: (i) the self-assessment process and integration of institutional research data; (ii) review team selection; (iii)

distance and online education; and (iv) work-based/ experiential learning. These features are examined critically using Harvey's key principles listed previously with a view to identifying evidence of best practice or gaps that need to be closed for the system's production of superior results. Figure 1 captures the selected components of the UWI quality assurance system being examined and their interaction with the best practice principles as well as the administrative and management elements necessary for developing a quality culture.

INSERT Figure 1: Key Elements of The UWI's Quality Assurance System

A mixed methodological approach is utilised involving a desk study of quality assurance review team reports from the various UWI campuses completed within the last three-five years; post-review evaluation instruments completed by review team members and heads of departments, as well as policy, and strategic planning documentation of the University and the Quality Assurance Unit. These documents are mined for data showing trends, concerns raised by teams, and best practices. For the integration of institutional research data, a comparative review was undertaken against QA systems used in two other higher education institutions as well as information provided by key informants. Literature on best practice is used to integrate and illuminate the information gleaned from this material. In so doing, the different experiences among the Campuses will be taken account of in the search after best practices.

Justification for QA Components Selected

The quality management system at The UWI has many components so the selection of aspects of this system for critical analysis in the context of best practices assessment was challenging. The selection of the four components analysed in this discussion was based largely on two factors: researcher interest supported by indications of importance in literature and experience in the field.

Institutional Research Data

Reliable institutional research data is essential for a worthwhile self-assessment process and is a precondition for institutional effectiveness. The importance of institutional research data is supported by Middaugh (2010) as well as the QAA, specifically in their *College Higher Education Toolkit: Engaging with the UK Quality Code for Higher Education* (May 2015). Middaugh underscores the value of institutional assessment for "...developing measures of institutional effectiveness and using that assessment information as the basis for strategic institutional decisions, especially with respect to allocation of human and fiscal resources"(p. ix) and for providing a focus on student learning, among other institutional outcomes.

Middaugh (2010) describes assessment as "the primary tool" for strengthening institutional structures and programmes supportive of student learning. He asserts that both programme and institutional accreditation operate in a "culture of evidence" that requires institutions to qualitatively and quantitatively demonstrate that they are meeting student learning goals and effectively marshalling human and fiscal resources toward that end"(p. x). For Middaugh, the opportunity to measure student and institutional effectiveness should be embraced by HEIs to demonstrate the fulfilment of their mission to all stakeholders.

Selection and Training of Review Teams

Dallas and Perkins (2013) argue that existing models of internal and external quality assurance in higher education maintain a central role for independent expert evaluators (peer reviewers). Indeed, Frederiks, Zweissler and Weber (2012) argue:

A fundamental part of external quality assurance procedures is peer review. The connection between the quality of the procedure and the 'quality' of the team members is apparent: no matter how competently the quality standards, frameworks and procedures are composed – if the experts are not conversant with the application of these standards, the quality of the procedure might suffer. (p. 9)

Such is the importance of these experts that the success of a review hangs on the calibre of persons recruited for these roles.

Dallas and Perkins conducted an analysis of the selection, constitution and functioning of quality assurance review/accreditation teams in light of international best practices. In so doing, they were able to identify several key best practices in the area that were applied to their respective roles as quality assurance practitioners (Perkins - a quality assurance officer at The UWI and Dallas - an evaluator for the University Council of Jamaica and former review team member for The UWI). These key practices included: selecting qualified, independent peer reviewers who have the confidence of those being reviewed; maintaining and asserting the independence of reviewers by the signing of confidentiality agreements and provision of codes of ethics; providing training for evaluators in the process of the specific agency/institution for which the evaluation was conducted; and evaluating the performance of evaluators following the site visit (Dallas and Perkins 2013). This analysis led to the identification of gaps in The UWI system.

This paper extends the research of Dallas and Perkins by focussing specifically on The UWI review team selection and training practices. It analyses these practices through the lens of Harvey (2012) to highlight the presence or absence of best practices. The sources of information utilised in this aspect of the discussion include post review evaluation forms completed by heads of departments, review team member post-evaluation forms, post-review faculty debriefing reports from the Open Campus, modules of the Quality Assurance Unit and the report for the review of the Quality Assurance Unit (2011).

Work-based Learning

The Council on Higher Education (2004) defines work-based learning (WBL) as a

[C]omponent of a learning programme that focuses on the application of theory in an authentic, work-based context. It addresses specific competences identified for the acquisition of a qualification, which relate to the development of skills that will make the learner employable and will assist in developing his/her personal skills. Employer and professional bodies are involved in the assessment of experiential learning, together with academic staff. (p. 29)

The UWI 2012-2017 Strategic Plan describes the key attributes of The UWI graduate to include critical and creative thinking, possessing effective communication and general interpersonal skills, being innovative and entrepreneurial, being socially, culturally and environmentally

responsible, and being guided by strong ethical values. These attributes are directly linked in the literature to the benefits of participation in good quality work-based learning programmes in secondary and post-secondary education (Swali and Kampits, 2004). The UWI's quality assurance review process, predicated on a fitness for purpose model, becomes accountable for assisting the disciplines, and, by extension, The University to recognize the links and gaps between its aspirations for the quality graduate, and the realities of WBL provision.

Special Quality Assurance Focus on Online and Distance Education

Current international trends continue to show a marked increase in the number of institutions offering programmes through the distance online modality (Adams, 2007; O'Lawrence, 2007). With the establishment of The UWI Open Campus in 2008 and the appointment of a quality assurance officer in 2009, The UWI reinforced its commitment to academic quality assurance in that modality and, through the QAU, commenced a process of reconceptualising its academic quality assurance systems to adequately address the needs of distance and online education. In developing quality mechanisms suited for its modality, the Open Campus was able to learn from the quality management system in place at the residential campuses while itself serving as a model of best practices in quality assurance, as demonstrated below.

Integration of Institutional Research Data in the Self-Assessment Process

In *College Higher Education Toolkit: Engaging with the UK Quality Code for Higher Education* (May 2015), the QAA identifies "management information" necessary for quality assurance and enhancement. Such information is reflective of the "culture of evidence" to which Middaugh (2010) refers and includes alumni and employer feedback; feedback from external reviews and accreditations; admissions data; data on the relationship between student entry qualifications and assessment outcomes; use of external examining; internal monitoring and review drawing upon qualitative and quantitative information "...to identify areas for development as well as highlighting good practice" (p.16).

With specific reference to monitoring and review, the *Toolkit* discusses the importance of annual monitoring that is: "...evaluative rather than descriptive, evidence-based, and focused on action and enhancement..." as well as maintenance of standards and quality (p. 99). This requires the systematic gathering of robust information from students, external examiners and other stakeholders.

The *Toolkit* highlights, as a feature of good practice, "The rigorous, robust and self-critical approach to programme monitoring and review demonstrated through the process of the Programme Quality Self-Assessment Reports (PQSAR)" (p.100). Given the importance attributed internationally to institutional research data in the monitoring of quality, this section of the paper critically examines practices at The UWI in respect of programme review and the self-assessment process.

A Sample of Gaps Identified by Quality Assurance Review (QAR) Teams

The importance of institutional research data in the preparation of self-assessment reports (SARs) has been highlighted by review teams, especially in the absence of such data. Reports of quality assurance review teams increasingly draw attention to the need for accurate data in SARs. In a recent review report, for example, the reviewers stated: “The issue of accurate data is an important one... It is clear that the University needs to address the question of accurate data that will allow the Department to plan for the future” (Report of the QAR, Department of Political Science, STA, 2015, p.10).

One Review Team actually specified the data that would be required. They noted, “Collect survey data from employers and alumni for assessing programme outcomes versus the stated aims and objectives” (Report of the QAR, Computing & Information Technology, STA, 2015 p. 17). There are similar examples from other campuses.

Various challenges exist in accessing data for the SAR such as unavailable or incomplete data. The review report of the QAU suggested that the QAU should help departments to secure more robust data for the self-assessment process. That report encouraged the QAU to forge relevant links with other University entities which had responsibility for such data the Team noted that:

The QAU’s contribution to defining key quality performance indicators for The UWI is crucial, for example, in ensuring that the quality review process is underpinned by sound data focused at unit level; data that truly capture the performance of the unit from all stakeholders’ perspectives. (2011, p.2)

Interestingly, the Team opined that “one of the reasons for the present absence of these data from quality reviews is that the culture of giving and receiving feedback of this kind is too weak within UWI to allow sufficient data to be reliably collected at this level” (2011, p. 2). Such strong conclusions bear consideration and necessary action.

Good Documentation

The Review Team’s report for the review of the QAU (hereafter QAU RTR 2011) commended the good documentation developed by the QAU. Quality management processes were described as being “well documented” and the Quality Modules as “well written providing good guidance to Departments, Institutes, Centres, Units and Sites (DISCUS) undergoing review and to review team members” (p. 3).

Efficiency in the Use of Resources

The inadequacy of reliable data results in SARs that are more descriptive than analytical. This is in spite of the QAU guidelines for self-assessment reports (Module 4) posing several questions to guide the development of these reports and detailing the institutional research data needed, similar to that discussed in the QAA’s *Toolki*. This has implications for deriving the fullest possible benefits of the review process and therefore represents a gap to be closed. One strategy that can help to close this gap is the operationalisation of a co-ordinated mechanism for the provision of reliable and up-to-date data to academic departments preparing for a quality assurance review. The collection, analysis and provision of such data to academic units would greatly reduce the workload of the staff in preparing the SAR, while enhancing the value of the self-assessment process for academic units and the entire review process.

Stakeholder Engagement

The QAU Review Team identified the Unit's engagement of stakeholders for the purpose of defining key quality performance indicators as a gap in its process. The Team concluded that The UWI must ensure that sound data is captured on the performance of programmes from the perspective of all stakeholders. The Unit has been encouraged to reflect upon its processes to better "...engage with stakeholder groups and communities of interest, including but not limited to students, faculty, staff and external partners' (QAU RTR, 2011, pp. 2, 25). The Team noted that all four Campuses required "... access to much more purposeful data to inform the processes of departmental and unit management, quality review, and enhancement" (p.13).

The development of a culture in which data are provided to departments regularly will be necessary to bridge this gap. In this regard, The UWI residential campuses can follow the lead of the Open Campus where Computing and Technology Services (CATS) has set up a QAU Review web space where all data is provided for the use of QAU and the Academic Programming and Delivery Division (APAD) for the preparation of SARs. The examples of McGill University and the University of Quebec, Montreal are also salient.

Monitoring and Evaluation

At the level of the self-study, the SAR is itself a monitoring and evaluation mechanism. While the benefits of quality assurance reviews, of which the SAR is a key component, have been validated by both the QAU RTR as well as evaluators of accreditation agencies in the Anglophone Caribbean, there is still room for improvement. The usefulness of the SAR can be strengthened through the systematic integration of current, reliable and complete data. Without this, the full value of the quality assurance review process is not optimised.

The approach to the management of institutional research data in the self-study process at both McGill University and the University of Quebec, Montreal (UQAM) is reflective of the importance attributed to monitoring institutional effectiveness. At McGill, the Office of Planning and Institutional Analysis is mandated to make available statistical data to academic departments not later than three months before a unit review site visit exercise. The approach at UQAM is very structured and systematic. At UQAM, each programme undergoes three levels of evaluation (annual monitoring, triennial evaluation and evaluation every 10 years) attesting to its strength. At each level of evaluation, the role of data collection and analysis is very important. An annual portrait of a programme is provided by an administrative entity responsible for academic planning and institutional research. Programme staff must also table an annual monitoring report describing the state of the programme using quantitative data. Both of these annual reviews feed into programme evaluations every three years which in turn feed into programme evaluations every ten years (Interviews with Dr Phillip Smith, Associate Director, Cyclical Unit Review Office, McGill University, Dr Anik Lalonde and Dr Sylvie Qu  r  , Office of Cyclical Programme Review, UQAM, July 23 and 24, 2014).

Policy

At a policy level, The UWI has articulated, as one of the critical success factors for the successful implementation of The UWI 2012-2017 Strategic Plan "...a commitment to sharing and using the results of institutional research for organisational improvement..." (p. 34). This, however, appears to be the only significant statement in the Plan that underscores the importance

of institutional research data in The UWI's Quality Management System. Greater emphasis seems to be placed on "Faculty-Led Research and Innovation". For its successor Strategic Plan, The UWI will do well to articulate and implement a more robust policy relating to the use of institutional research data to inform strategic planning and self-assessment processes.

Leadership and Human Resource Management

While several UWI entities are involved in data collection and analysis, until very recently, there has been largely an absence of coordination of the activities of these entities. With effect from the academic year 2014/2015, however, the Pro-Vice Chancellor for Planning & Development has exercised the leadership necessary for addressing the existing gaps in respect of communication and co-ordination for integration of institutional research data in the self-assessment process. His hosting of joint meetings of the University Office of Planning & Development with campus planning units and the QAU, for example, is reflective of the wise deployment of UWI's human resources in the service of institutional effectiveness, and, more particularly, to better support the self-study process in the context of programme review as well as programme and institutional accreditation. This is clear evidence of leadership commitment to closing the gaps identified as The UWI continues working towards a strengthened culture of collecting and using institutional research data.

Review Team Selection and Training

The QAA UK is an exemplar in terms of well documented policies and procedures for review team selection and training. At the QAA reviews are undertaken by teams drawn from a pool of more than 400 trained reviewers (QAA 2015). These reviewers come from colleges and universities across the UK, including recently retired academics. The Agency has developed a profile of its reviewers showing educational affiliation, level of qualification, gender and job type. The principle of peer reviewing is central to the creation of the pool as it "ensures providers can be confident that judgments are made by those with experience and understanding of higher education. Students are partners in their learning experiences so each team has a student as a full member" (QAA 2015, p. 1). Care is taken that review teams reflect the type of educational provider being reviewed.

It is of note that the QAA team does not include international experts as is the expectation of expert teams in the European context (Frederik, Zwiessler and Weber 2012). Neither are industry professionals part of the process. Students are a key part of their process, however. Given that the QAA is a national agency, their team composition will be different from that of The UWI, which ordinarily includes local and international members, members from academia as well as industry, but no student membership. As Perkins and Dallas (2013) noted the inclusion of student membership in UWI teams is worth considering.

Well Documented Practice and the role of Policy

There is currently no UWI Quality Policy in which the mandate of the QAU is embedded. The explicit policy framework for the QAU is *the Roles and Responsibilities of the Board for Undergraduate Studies* (Revised June 2009). There exists a documented procedure for the composition, identification and selection of review teams that effectively benchmarks at three levels: 1) internally, with the presence of a senior academic in the same discipline from another UWI Campus; 2) externally, through an external/academic team leader; and 3) industry/market through a local/regional professional with knowledge of the field (QAU Module 4). In the case

of online programmes, efforts are made to ensure that a specialist in distance and online education is included on the teams so that the modality can be thoroughly assessed.

This procedure regarding selection and deployment of teams is embedded in various modules of the Quality Assurance Unit and has its basis in taking account of the best practices in team selection in various internal quality assurance processes across the globe. The presence of this documentation ensures uniformity of practice across campuses and disciplines and points of comparison for practice and effectiveness. However, the absence of a larger quality policy in which the QAU mandate and that of other entities in the Quality Management System needs to be addressed. Indeed, the QAU has already begun a process for drafting such a policy.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Like the self assessment report, the review team is itself a monitoring and evaluation mechanism. However, monitoring and evaluating team performance and experience of the review are undertaken formally by post-review evaluation forms sent to heads of department (HODs) or, in the case of the Open Campus, post-review debriefings, undertaken with APAD. Members of review teams are also asked to complete an evaluation form to determine their experience of the review process. The completion of the post-review questionnaire is voluntary in some cases, mandatory in others.

Five post-review questionnaires completed by HODs at Mona were examined. Of significance is that only one of the forms returned by HODs from Mona, where those forms are currently used, mentions concerns with review team performance. This is perhaps a result of the process by which the departments have a key role in nominating members of the team as well as the broad coverage of the team due to its constitution. The mention in question is from the HOD of the Geography and Geology Department at Mona, who commented that more informal contact should be allowed between reviewers and the staff so that “problematic issues” can be better understood. The context for this is the practice of the QAU to limit contact between members of the review team and those of the Department being reviewed outside of the confines of the review to preserve the transparency and independence of the process. The QAU RTR 2011 endorsed efforts to maintain this practice and so avoid instances of “inappropriate collaboration”. Departments often find it difficult to appreciate this practice, however.

Other comments from Mona HODs included:

“Facilitate Section meetings at the QAU with a moderator, for the purpose of compiling the Self Assessment. Thus, more participation of Section members in this exercise may be guaranteed” (HOD, Language, Linguistics and Philosophy, post Philosophy Section Review, Mona 2012).

“Provide a set of benchmark criteria that compares with the operations of what an academic Department does. In some cases, the reviewers are making recommendations that are outside of the scope of operations of the Departments” (HOD, Management Studies, 2012).

The first comment asks for more assistance from the QAU in the writing of the SAR and is perhaps needing the QAU to have a more hands on approach in a department's preparation. This has to be carefully handled as the distance required between the department being assessed and the QAU must be maintained; at the same time, the QAU can work at building capacity through its Quality Fora. Indeed, to that end, the QAU organised for Mona a 2014 Forum, entitled, "Quality Ahead: The HOD, the Administrator and the QA Review" aimed at, among other things, sensitising HODs and administrators about their roles and responsibilities and providing assistance to improve the data gathering and data mining elements of the process (also part of a means of addressing the gaps discussed in the previous section.). Similarly, the second comment may also be asking the QAU to set standards of performance which lies outside of their remit; the review process is premised on the departments establishing their own standards of performance based on their aim and objectives against which their performance is measured. The QAU is sensitive, however, to the department's concerns about their operations being impacted by matters beyond their powers. Such matters, especially having to do with wider University systems, do impact the quality of the provision of a department and the means have to be found to ensure that these are addressed post-review.

Regarding the experience of team members: eight evaluation forms completed by team members, who participated in reviews at the St Augustine Campus, were examined. The responses uniformly rated such matters as the clarity of the Guidelines for the Review Process prepared by the QAU as "good" or "very good". In the open-ended questions on areas for improvement and general comments, the comments were very positive, for example, "the site visit was well planned and organised" (team member, Life Sciences, STA 2015). Other comments shared included:

"This has been a very good experience – great collegiality, resources, cooperation, etc." (team member, Computing and Information Technology, STA 2015)

"I would have preferred clearer terms of reference for the deliverables of the team" (team member, Political Science, STA 2015) [Of note is that this team member rated clarity of guidelines as "good", while other areas were rated "very good".]

Similar comments were gleaned from the feedback from review team members serving the Mona Campus.

"Full marks all round!" (team member, Economics, Mona 2012)

"Cultural event for the sake of the external assessor" (team member, Geology, Mona 2014).

"The review process is thorough, but I'm not sure it needs to take an entire working week" (team member, History 2013).

The comments and commendations are very useful to ensure that the experience of the review teams is enhanced.

Efficient Use of Resources

The UWI invests significant resources each year to undertake QARs, including the travel and accommodation costs for overseas team members as well as stipends and meals. The concern with cost effectiveness and value for money is always close to the surface, especially in a contracting financial space. The QAU officer supporting the Mona Campus has attempted to add value at Mona via lectures delivered by the team leader on the Thursday afternoon during the site visit. Team leaders/external academics are expected to be senior academics with significant scholarship in their field. The invitation to deliver a public lecture adds value to The UWI experience by making available up-to-date research from world renowned scholars while providing the lecturer with an international audience/community of conversation/critical community for their research. This lecture forms another level of collaboration between the QAU and the department. Since 2009, all external academics/team leaders have accepted the offer to deliver a public lecture with topics as wide ranging as “Writing, Rap, and the Racial State: Articulating an Afro-Colombian Counterdiscourse” delivered by Dr Jerome Branch, University of Pittsburgh; “Reclaiming the agency of marginalized peoples in the processes of creolization in the afro-Atlantic” delivered by Dr Nicholas Faraclas, University of Puerto Rico; and “Decolonisation in Popular Life” delivered by Prof Bill Schwarz, Queen Mary College, University of London. In addition, one seminar each has been delivered at the Mona and St Augustine campuses.

At the same time, a well prepared team will engage the process well and be able to deliver a report that will assist the department in improving its delivery. Effective training of the team before a review may enhance effectiveness of the process. This necessity was captured in a comment from a team member from St Augustine: “A QA seminar to be provided at the start where documents are introduced and then time (2 hrs) allocated to familiarisation” (team member, Chemical Engineering, STA 2014). Such preparation is part of a process of effective use and development of the human resources for a review team site visit. This would effectively integrate the teams into The UWI quality culture and so ensure that their assessment of a discipline’s performance is more relevant.

Leadership

The role of the QAU during the site visit is also important in monitoring and evaluating the work of the team. Team members and heads of department have noted the exceptional leadership provided by the QAU in organising and coordinating reviews, as indicated above.

Mechanisms for Evaluating Work-based Learning in the Quality Assurance Review Process: Towards Creating the Distinctive UWI Graduate

The issues of the relevance and utility of UWI programmes is an important consideration in the quality assurance review process. A critical examination of the place and processes of WBL in the review mechanism is therefore important in an assessment of relevance and utility as components of quality.

In keeping with the Harvey (2012) model, Bailey, Hughes and Moore, (2004) note that the pedagogical quality indicators of work-based learning can be categorised under instructive headings. For example, workplace quality indicators focus on engagement – higher quality programmes correlate with higher levels of goal-oriented engagement for the students, faculty

and employers, in their defined interrelated roles as planners, learners, teachers, facilitators, mentors, assessors, and interns. Classroom quality indicators focus on reflection – clearly defined and shared objectives permit students to fulfil the requirements of reflection on their work place learning, and assimilate knowledge and skills in ways that facilitate greater transferability. Other critical quality indicators span and integrate both the classroom and the workplace, for example, good documentation and constructive assessment of the work-based learning programme, including its overall evaluation.

WBL Examples: Good or Best Practice; Gaps to be Filled

Documentation and Policy

The review reports of twelve disciplines and sub-disciplines were examined, including good-practice examples. None of these could refer to a cohesive documented policy on work-based learning within the University to guide the disciplines' approach to WBL, though five of the programmes reported having used some form of WBL, to enhance help students' work-related competence and competencies, including attitudes. The lack of clear policy documentation is often accompanied by minimal documentation and analysis of student outcomes from internship programmes, both at the front end where the learning objectives are created, and at the back end where monitoring and evaluation should provide current data and other pertinent decision-oriented information to further guide WBL policy. Even in the good-practice examples provided below, documentation that helps to build a valid base for policy decision making is still in its infancy. Review Reports do commend disciplines for high quality WBL initiatives.

Chemistry: Efficient use of Resources; Documentation; Stakeholder Engagement; Monitoring and Evaluation

The Chemistry Department's internship programme, for example, was cited as being highly consistent with producing most desired student outcomes, being sustainable, and having the potential to further strengthen the Chemistry curriculum and, by extension, student learning and research:

The merger of the final year project with the industry has proved to be mutually beneficial to the student and the industry. Interns have the opportunity to acquire skills and secure employment with the industry partner. The communication ... between the Department and the industry in arranging the internships is personable and favoured and this has successfully led to relationship building and partnerships. (p.7)

The opportunity for students to gain work experience in industry using some resources that are not readily available on the campus provides an example of efficiency in the use of resources. Documentation gaps and less than systematic monitoring and evaluation represent areas to be improved. The underlying policy for WBL in the discipline needs to be articulated (as does the University's policy in this regard). Monitoring of the WBL mechanism within the department is still very dependent on the availability and good will of the faculty, who use their personal contacts and resources to keep internship opportunities open where possible.

Economics: Efficient use of Resources; Documentation; Stakeholder Engagement; Monitoring and Evaluation

The Caribbean Regional Technical Assistance Centre (CARTAC)¹-University of the West Indies Internship Programme provides valuable work experience opportunities to graduate students in the Department of Economics, through either a central bank or a research institution in the Caribbean. In the past, students have been placed at the Bank of Jamaica, the Central Bank of Barbados, the Eastern Caribbean Central Bank, Central Bank of Trinidad and Tobago and the Caribbean Centre for money and finance. The internship usually runs for three months, and candidates are placed in an institution as close to their home country as possible for the period.

The Review Team learned that during the internship, students work on both research and practical policy issues. Faculty, graduate students and industry representatives corroborated that the research topic is normally in an area of interest to the host institution and is supervised by leading researchers in the regional Central Banks. Consequently, the students normally get the opportunity to interact and work with regional scholars and practitioners in the field. The resulting research papers are normally jointly published with the student's supervisor, thereby launching students' careers as applied economists. Students also get the opportunity to participate in many of the day-to-day activities of economists and analysts of their host institution, thereby gaining additional authentic learning experiences, in keeping with the tenets of good practice in WBL.

Levels of stakeholder engagement in this process appear appropriately high: collaboration in setting the objectives of the internship, the work plan and assessment methods; liaison between the industry partner and the academic department; debriefing of students periodically on their progress during the internship. This WBL model also shows practical application of the tenets of harmonization that are important to the mandate of the Board for Undergraduate Studies, and for The University's strategic direction. The documentation on student aims and outcomes appears adequate; however, documentation on evaluating the programme itself should be improved at the campus level, in part to provide a sound basis for disseminating this model where feasible to other disciplines. In addition, the policy framework should be stabilized by The University, and further disseminated across disciplines.

Existing Mechanisms for Evaluating WBL in the Quality Assurance Review

The Quality Assurance Review mechanism for monitoring and evaluating WBL within the respective disciplines is currently incorporated into the general discipline review; even hidden therein. The explicit focus of the review process is on the conventional courses, as key indicators of outcomes in producing the distinctive university graduate. Though WBL components of programmes are not ignored by the review process, there are gaps in regard to evaluating WBL in the discipline review.

Most work-based learning components within the University are not documented as courses – they are add-ons; there is no cohesive policy for work-based learning. This means that the

¹ <http://www.cartac.org/> is the CARTAC website. Participant testimonies from UWI students participating in the internship programme are found on the following webpage: <http://cartac.org/internships/>

QAU's review mechanism must explicitly work with academic and administrative leadership to target WBL components, especially as the vast majority of review reports at the Cave Hill Campus call for structured WBL. In the QAU's Guidance for Reviewers (Module 5), where industry stakeholders are mentioned, it is almost invariably in the context of stakeholder feedback from employers, and employers contributing to curriculum or programme development activities – not so much about WBL, but somehow assuming that WBL is implied. The QAU's pre-review evaluation matrix prompts the discipline to consider whether and how far it has included business and industry stakeholders in its programme development and revision strategies; again, this focus is not explicitly on WBL.

To exemplify best practice in evaluating the disciplines, therefore, including throwing clearer light on WBL in a formative way, the QA Review process can effect some improvements. For one, we can consider engaging in a more focused way with administrative and academic leadership to articulate and document WBL policy. The QAU can also consider engaging disciplines on the tenets of quality in work-based education and training, to establish best practice baselines as a context for enhancing WBL components. The QAU can re-examine its evaluation instrument to include more explicit criteria on WBL in the sections on the curriculum, research and outreach. A further recommendation would be to actively support the disciplines to disseminate their identified best practices in WBL; for example, a Quality Forum can focus on WBL best practice, and feature the presentation of an exemplar.

Distance Online Education

Distance education refers to the teaching and learning modality where there is a separation of student and tutor, that is, the key players in the teaching and learning process are not in the same place at the same time.

In the USA, the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (CRAC) has agreed to best practices for distance education; best practices which are in keeping with the essential institutional qualities that have long been articulated by the accrediting bodies. The regional accreditation commissions in the USA agreed five general domains of “best practice” which must be addressed in the evaluation and/or review of distance education programmes. The Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications (WETC, 2000), was the first regional accreditation body to develop standards addressing nine domains. These domains are: (1) Access; (2) Learning Community; (3) Faculty Support; (4) Student Support; (5) Curriculum and Instruction; (6) Evaluation and Assessment; (7) Institutional Context and Commitment; (8) Facilities and Finance; and (9) Library and Learning Resources.

As distance online education carries its own best practice guidelines, a comparison was conducted between Harvey (2012) and WETC (2000). Although there is not a ‘clean’ alignment between the two sets of best practice criteria, the focus of the best practice guidelines for distance education as articulated by WETC (2000) is primarily on the engagement of key stakeholders. The comparative table is shown at Appendix 1. These findings are in keeping with the theory of transactional distance expounded by Moore (1997). Therefore, the focus on engagement with the stakeholder is seeking to reduce the psychological distance felt by students in the distance learning environment.

A further perusal of the literature showed the existence of a rubric of best practices for teaching online. This rubric was developed by You (2010) as part of doctoral studies. Similar to the findings highlighted in Appendix 1, You's rubric is focused on stakeholder engagement, that is, effective engagement with the student. A closer scrutiny of the rubric showed that the Open Campus had established benchmarks for each of the areas and that the review team reports have captured many best, good and promising practices in these areas. This rubric is shown as Appendix 2.

Engagement with Stakeholders

This section will focus on areas of stakeholder engagement, namely student orientation, student support, facilitator response time and the use of online discipline experts in discipline reviews.

Student-staff interactions

In the theory of transactional distance, Moore (1972) examined the psychological and communication space between learner and tutor in distance education. Moore posited that geographical distance in distance education did not impact on student success but that the level of transactional distance between learner and tutor did have a negative or positive impact on success. He concluded that the frequency of dialogue, flexibility of course structure and frequency of interaction between student and tutor and student and student contributed to transactional distance. Moore further argued that student success and satisfaction mirrored the increase or decrease in transactional distance.

Student orientation

In the online environment, there is need for much student support and interaction. What several reviews have shown is that the Open Campus has taken a multi-layered approach to addressing/avoiding transactional distance. The course delivery team works closely to support and monitor the interactions of the e-tutors with the students. This team is also responsible for two of the four phases of orientation for all new students. In this regard, the review team report for BSc Accounting (2014) noted that:

[T]he Course Delivery Supervisor and Assistants highlighted outstanding commitment and some areas of best practise. For example, the supervisor awarded a plaque to the Course Delivery Assistant (CDA) who the students selected as the most helpful during the orientation period. (BSc Accounting, 2013, p. 3)

Research shows that effective orientation programmes are vital to student success in distance online education. The review of BSc Banking and Finance (2015) noted that:

From the interviews and data collected, the team observed that student attendance at the orientation events is far from 100 per cent which seem to be one of the reasons for the persistent demand for academic advising. It is felt that the orientation events offer an excellent opportunity for managing student expectations and the team feels that it should emphasise that given the online nature of the programme, students are expected to take more initiative in seeking active interaction to facilitate their own learning. (BSc Banking and Finance, 2014, pp. 13-14)

Facilitator response time

Facilitators within the Open Campus are required to respond to student queries within 24 hours of posting in the Learning Exchange. This response time was noted by You (2010) in her rubric as evidence of exemplary practice. The review of BSc Banking and Finance (2014) found that:

[D]espite the extensive support, there were instances where student queries were not responded to within the stipulated time period of 24 hours. However, it was noticed that in most such cases the lapses occurred because of the breach of system as the student attempted to contact the CC directly rather than through the Learning Exchange which is monitored by the CDAs. (p. 8)

The report went on to note that although no exact figures were available to show that the response time of 24 hours was met 80 per cent of the time. It further suggested that 20 per cent had a response time of approximately 48 hours. You (2010) considers 48 hours to be an acceptable best practice.

In the review of BSc Management Studies (2013), the review team noted that:

The Open Campus has created a number of policies to ensure that students receive exceptional instructional services. This includes such policies as requiring that students' questions get answered within 24 hours. Such a policy is monitored and regular performance reports are passed up the organisation. Such a policy is a good start... (p. 14)

Interestingly, the review team for BSc Banking and Finance (2015) considered the 24 hour response time to be too restrictive and suggested that it should be increased to 48 hours. They indicated:

[T]he 24 hour turnaround time is too short particularly as students may send their queries from different time zones. The team also noted that the turnaround time for student queries from course co-ordinators/e-tutors in other comparable international institutions was 48 hours.

A point to note is that the Campus currently serves students in Belize, Jamaica and the Eastern Caribbean; these countries fall into three time zones with the largest time being a 2 hour difference between Belize and the Eastern Caribbean. As the time zone difference is so small it is not felt that it should have undue impact on response times, particularly as the majority of the facilitators and students are currently based in the Eastern Caribbean.

Here we have conflicting standards. On the one hand, we have the best practice rubric rating a 24 hour response time as "exemplary" and 48 hour as "acceptable". On the other hand, we have the review team suggesting that the "exemplary" benchmark may be too ambitious. Both these standards attempt to take account of Moore's (1974) emphasising the importance of contact between students and tutors and the negative effects that lack of ready interactions might have on students' motivation and their ultimate success. The current Open Campus exemplary standard, while not met 100 per cent of the time, perhaps best exemplifies the means for reducing

transactional distance. The Open Campus should continue to strive for achievement of this exemplary best practice.

Student Interventions

Current research is still showing that distance online courses usually have an attrition rate between 20 and 40 per cent more than traditional face-to-face university courses. Brigham (2003) conducted a survey of four-year institutions which offered distance online education programmes and found that 66 per cent of those institutions had an 80 per cent or better completion rate; and 87 per cent had 70 per cent or better completion. The Open Campus has a retention rate of approximately 80 per cent. This is showing that the Campus performance is consistent with the international trends associated with 66 per cent of distance online education institutions. Indeed, the review team for BSc Banking and Finance (2015) noted that they were:

[A]lso very impressed to note that the OC had an 80 per cent retention rate for its online programmes. This is noteworthy as internationally online programmes usually carry a retention rate of closer to 20 per cent. (p. 2)

The literature further suggests that the attrition rates could be lowered through the use of timely prevention strategies. The two most common measures used to identify students who are at risk are academic failure and disengagement.

Lizzio and Wilson (2011) in a booklet entitled, *Identifying and supporting students who are at risk of academic failure* identified four levels of prevention. These levels are: general/primary; targeted/selective; secondary; and tertiary. Appendix 3 shows the levels with brief descriptors.

What was noted from the intervention levels is that the Open Campus currently uses each form to varying degrees. Whilst acknowledging the challenges facing the facilitators within the Open Campus, which included having to deal with students with varying levels of past academic success and with work, life and family commitments, the review team for BSc Management Studies (2013) noted that:

As we spoke with various support personnel, we were impressed by their enthusiasm for the challenge and their creativity in dealing with these students. They begin with the premise that these are all individuals, not just a cluster of “students,” and that each can be helped. They speak of “humanizing” classes. They point to special efforts – phone calls, emails – to reach students who may be missing classes. Given the characteristics of this student body, we know of no quick fix for the problem. We strongly commend the current approaches, and recommend that the programme continue to support the current organization with its multiple levels of support for students. Although this may have resource implications, it remains absolutely crucial. (p.14)

The review team for BSc Accounting (2014) noted:

In several instances, course delivery staff worked exceedingly long hours to monitor the level of feedback and interaction of the course co-ordinators, the e-tutors, and the students at risk ... (p. 7).

However, that report did go on to question the sustainability of the level of support that was currently being provided to online students. Similar comments were raised by the team reviewing BSc Banking and Finance (2015). They suggested that “[T]he existing extensive support, though commendable, may be preventing students from taking full responsibility for their own learning” (p. 9).

Amid the caution from the review team, the literature suggests that there is need for tailored support structures and systems in the online environment if students are to be successful. Therefore, the Campus would need to ensure that its support is tailored to foster independent learning skills in students as well as striking the right balance between support and not making students dependent.

Concluding Thoughts

In the search after best practices in The UWI quality assurance system, the framework provided by Harvey (2012) - efficiency in the use of resources, being well-documented, engagement of key stakeholders and undertaking monitoring and evaluation – has proved to be a very useful tool. Harvey’s framework is mirrored in the administrative and other principles recognised in the literature on culture change as being important in the establishment of a quality culture in higher education. This was demonstrated in the examination of: i) the integration of institutional research data in the self-assessment process; (ii) review team selection; (iii) quality assurance in work based/experiential learning; and (iv) quality assurance of distance and online education – key practices in The UWI quality assurance system.

Institutional Research Data

Examining the practice of utilising institutional research data in the preparation of self-assessment reports has shown that review teams are often presented with reports that lack the requisite data to demonstrate or evaluate performance. This undermines best practice principles relating to efficiency in the use of resources and engagement of key stakeholders. Mechanisms need to be found to provide departments with the requisite data and the QAU RTR suggested that the QAU function as a mechanism in this regard. The leadership in data management and provision has been undertaken by the PVC Planning and Development and indications of the move towards establishing better data practices has begun. At the same time, as it enters another strategic planning cycle, The UWI will do well to articulate and implement a more robust policy relating to the use of institutional research data to inform strategic planning and self- assessment processes.

Review Teams

Review teams are a central quality assurance mechanism and the success of a review often hinges on the quality of the team selected. Global best practices on panel selection, training and deployment reiterates the value of training and evaluating team members to ensure that they better deliver on their task. A well prepared team will engage the process well and be able to deliver a report that will assist the department in improving its delivery. Effective training of the team before a review may enhance effectiveness of the process. Such preparation is part of a process of effective use and development of the human resources for a review team site visit. This would effectively integrate the teams into The UWI quality culture and so ensure that their assessment of a discipline’s performance is more relevant.

At the same time, the current practice of evaluating the review process by the heads of the departments may be revised to include specific items on team formation and performance. This will directly capture perceptions of team performance that would go beyond the QAU Officer. Similarly, members of the team should be asked to evaluate their performance and that of their fellow panellists. This will help to improve team performance and serve as a means of judgment for recommending team members to other campuses.

WBL

WBL evaluation practices are often hidden within the review of more traditional practices, such as course evaluation. To exemplify best practice in evaluating the disciplines, including throwing clearer light on WBL in a formative way, the QA review process therefore needs to effect some improvements. For one, the QAU should engage with administrative and academic leadership in a more focussed way to articulate and document WBL policy. At the same time, the QAU should engage with disciplines in a conversation on the tenets of quality in work-based education and training, to establish best practice baselines as a context for enhancing WBL components. The QAU needs to re-examine its evaluation instrument to include more explicit criteria on WBL in the sections on the curriculum, research and outreach. In line with the expected outcomes of the Harvey research, the QAU should actively support the disciplines to disseminate their identified best practices in WBL; for example, a Quality Forum can focus on WBL best practice, and feature the presentation of an exemplar.

Open Distance learning

In the case of best practice in the distance online environment, review teams have shown that the distance online provision of The University has a number of best practices including:

- a. exemplary facilitator response rates
- b. acceptable student orientation systems which facilitate students' integration into the campus and
- c. acceptable student support structures.

The caution about the high level of student support should be considered to ensure that the structure is constructive and does not create dependency.

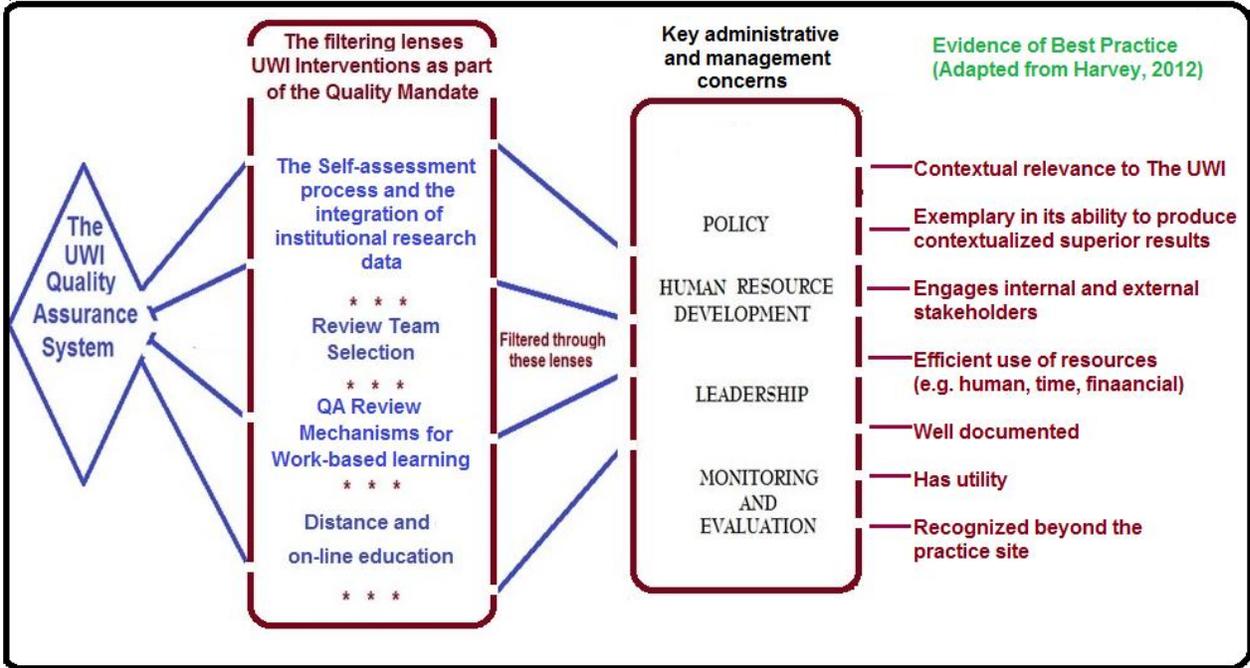


Figure 1:

Appendix 1

Harvey vs Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications (WETC)

Harvey, 2012	WETC, 2000
Efficient use of resources	Facilities and finance Library and learning resources
Good documentation	Access
Engagement of key stakeholders	Curriculum and instruction Learning Community Library and learning resources Faculty support Student support Institutional context and commitment
Monitoring and Evaluation	Evaluation and Assessment

Appendix 2

Best Practices for Teaching Online Rubric

	Exemplary	Acceptable	Needs Improvement
Instructor presence	The instructor actively participates in the course four times or more per week spending at least 60 minutes in Webcampus. This includes moderating discussions responding to inquiries.	The instructor actively participates in the course at least three times per week spending at least 30 minutes in Webcampus.	The instructor participates in the course less than three times per week and spends less than 30 minutes in Webcampus.
E-mail response time (queries in the Learning Exchange)	The instructor responds to student e-mail within 24 hours.	The instructor responds to student e-mail within 48 hours.	The instructor doesn't respond to student e-mail or greater than 48 hours.
Assignment feedback	Meaningful feedback is posted within 48 hours of the assignment due date.	Meaningful feedback is posted within 72 hours of the assignment due date.	Meaningful feedback is not provided within 72 hours of the assignment due date.
Student-to-instructor interaction	The instructor participates in and encourages regular (weekly) interaction with students.	The instructor participates in and encourages regular (at least every other week) interaction with students.	The instructor does not participate in or encourages regular interaction with students.
Student-to-Student interaction	The instructor encourages regular (weekly) interaction between students.	The instructor encourages regular (at least every other week) interaction between students.	The instructor does not encourage regular interaction between students.

	Exemplary	Acceptable	Needs Improvement
Student intervention (provided by the CDAs and PMs)	The instructor promptly (within one week) attempts intervention for students that have missed more than a week of instruction or shows clear signs of being at risk of failing the course.	The instructor promptly (within two weeks) attempts intervention for students that have missed more than a week of instruction or shows clear signs of being at risk of failing the course.	The instructor makes no attempt to provide intervention for students that have missed more than a week of instruction or show clear signs of being at risk of failing the course.
Accommodation for students with disabilities (relates primarily for examinations)	The instructor provides prompt and appropriate accommodation for students with disabilities (including responding to academic accommodation plans, arranging for proctored exams, or adjusting online exam time durations).		The instructor does not provide prompt and appropriate accommodation for students with disabilities (including responding to academic accommodation plans, arranging for proctored exams, or adjusting online exam time durations).

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