

# Translating quality systems from face-to-face to blended modalities in a tertiary institution in a small island state

**Nancy George, Office of Curriculum Development & Evaluation, The University of Technology,  
Jamaica**

## **Abstract**

The University of Technology, Jamaica (UTech) has developed a robust quality assurance and accreditation system and implemented it over the past eight years to ensure the high standards of its face-to-face course offerings. This system is supported within a clearly-articulated policy framework and managed by the Office of Curriculum Development and Evaluation (OCDE), whose primary responsibility is ensuring the quality of the University's offerings. University policy requires that Schools and Departments adhere to the quality assurance system and apply for the accreditation of their programmes from national and professional accrediting bodies.

However, this system was developed primarily to underpin face-to-face programmes. Now that increasing numbers of courses are planned for blended, distributed and distance offerings, the face-to-face quality assurance and accreditation systems are being modified to address the peculiarities of these new modalities while maintaining the University's standards.

This paper will review the features of UTech's quality assurance and accreditation system, explore the modifications of these applications that UTech has identified as necessary for the distance, distributed and blended programmes it offers, and explain the policies and procedures it has implemented to ensure the quality and accreditation of the distance and distributed offerings at the University.

## **BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT**

The University of Technology, Jamaica (UTech) emerged from the 37-year-old College of Arts Science and Technology (CAST) when the institution was accorded University status in 1995. CAST began its existence as the Jamaica Institute of Technology in 1958, but evolved into a technical college in the 1960s. The Jamaican government accorded CAST degree-granting status in the mid-1980s based on the institution's use of a post-Diploma model.

As CAST, the institution was the "poor relation" of the regional University of the West Indies (UWI), whose Mona campus is situated almost across the road from the Papine Campus of CAST/UTech. UWI, which began on the Mona campus as University College of the West Indies affiliated with the University of London in the 1950s, has a long and respected history in Jamaica and the region.

CAST established itself on a polytechnic model, and gained a reputation in the English-speaking Caribbean as the tertiary institution that catered to the needs of the workplace, producing "work-ready graduates" for business and industry. Although it was a nationally-funded tertiary institution catering to a specific clientele, CAST has developed a regional reputation and concomitant responsibilities, since many of its programmes are the only ones of their kind in the English-speaking Caribbean.

The institution's transition from technical college to technical university was completed with the Jamaican Parliament's award of the University's Charter in 1999. Throughout its history, however, CAST/UTech has consciously tried not to compete with UWI, recognising that the English-speaking Caribbean has urgent need for a diversity of affordable, accessible tertiary level programmes.

The first public university in Jamaica, UTech is the older of the two technical universities in the English-speaking Caribbean, and offers more than 100 discrete face-to-face programmes at postgraduate, undergraduate, diploma and certificate levels to a student body of 8,000+ students studying full time and part time in eight Schools and two

Departments situated in five Faculties. The majority its programmes are unique in Jamaica and, indeed, in the Commonwealth Caribbean.

## **UTECH'S EMPHASIS ON QUALITY ASSURANCE AND ACCREDITATION**

As a fledgling University in the context of the increasing globalisation of tertiary education, UTech realised from the outset that its credibility would rest on international recognition of the quality of its programme offerings; therefore, it made accreditation an institutional priority almost from the beginning of its transition from college to university. In 1998, UTech established within its Academic Affairs Division an Office of Curriculum Development and Evaluation (OCDE) responsible for ensuring the quality of its programmes, supporting accreditation applications and monitoring the progress of all Schools in achieving successful accreditation of their programmes. The OCDE support has included the following, each one of which is critical in ensuring programme quality and assuring accreditation:

- Establishment of a structured system of academic planning at the School, Faculty and institutional levels
- Employment of industry-based Advisory Boards to inform programme content and evaluation
- Academic and administrative policy development and implementation support
- Establishment of University-wide programme standards and requirements
- Development and implementation of appropriate support systems for both instructors and students
- Recruitment/upgrading of Faculty specialised in their content area(s) and relevant instructional techniques
- Lobbying for/identification of sufficient financial allocations to support programme offerings
- Regular student evaluation of their instructors and courses
- Standardised, systematic performance evaluation of academic staff
- Regular applications for accreditation of programmes to the national accrediting body (University Council of Jamaica) and international professional bodies.

While each of these continues to be a challenge in its own right, over the eight years since the OCDE was established, UTech has succeeded in establishing standards, regulations and systems to ensure quality, implementing policies that support both quality assurance and accreditation, and developing training and recognition systems to assist academic staff in keeping current in their instructional development.

Despite difficulties in addressing all the various aspects of quality assurance and preparing for accreditation visits, by August 2006, UTech had implemented a university-wide quality assurance system, achieved national accreditation for more than 80% of its programmes, established policies that support the quality assurance and accreditation processes, and introduced innovative research and training alternatives to encourage continued improvement in the face-to-face learning/teaching process.

## **THE NEED FOR DISTANCE AND BLENDED INSTRUCTIONAL APPROACHES AT UTECH**

### **A regional mandate in a national university**

UTech prides itself on addressing the needs of its market niche: university-level technical education at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels offered through learner-centred applied and co-operative approaches. As a national university, there is significant subsidisation of Jamaican students pursuing programmes at the University and a cap on fees that can be charged. However, since UTech is the only technical university in the English-speaking Caribbean offering undergraduate and Master's degrees in a diversity of areas, the university believes it also has a

regional and international mandate. While these broader responsibilities may appear somewhat contradictory in the context of a publicly-funded national university, they are necessary in a region like the Caribbean that is comprised of small island states, where the population density of individual islands makes the possibility of having a series of national universities impractical.

### **A broader national reach**

In addition, the UTech campus itself is close to reaching its maximum physical carrying capacity, and there is little adjacent land space available for the University's expansion. Therefore, UTech is exploring methods of expanding its national reach through franchises, satellite campuses and blended modalities of learning incorporating on-line and multimedia strategies.

In order to meet its national and regional responsibility and mandate, UTech is establishing blended and distance offerings to enable potential learners who cannot access the University's main campus to engage in learning via other alternatives in addition to face-to-face - online, paper-based, CD ROM and multimedia packages, franchise and remote location centres. The majority of the approaches conceptualised at present will involve blended approaches.

And, of course, if courses offered face-to-face were available in other modalities, many on-campus students would use the distance modalities to augment their face-to-face experiences, as the literature indicates that face-to-face students do in other educational systems where similar face-to-face and on-line offerings are available.

The challenge for the University is to ensure that its quality assurance system and standards are translated and applied appropriately to its distance/blended offerings. Following is a synopsis of how UTech is addressing that challenge in its distance offerings.

### **QUALITY ASSURANCE STRATEGIES IN UTECH'S DISTANCE AND BLENDED MODALITIES**

While the establishment of systems and strategies to ensure quality in face-to-face programmes is ensuring accreditation of UTech's traditional programme offerings and franchise operations, these systems require interpretation and modification for use in blended and/or distance offerings. The conversion of face-to-face courses to distance and/or blended modalities requires careful planning and thoughtful consideration to ensure the offering of high quality distance/blended courses.

#### **Establishment of a structured system of academic planning at the School, Faculty and institutional levels**

The responsibility for leading the initiation of distance programming at UTech falls to the Office of Continuing Education Open and Distance Learning (OCEODL). While this office has existed in UTech's organisational structure for several years, it has been operational for only four years. Its mandate is the planning and management of distance offerings at UTech. The actual programme translation, however, is the responsibility of the Schools and Faculties, and quality assurance and accreditation are managed by the OCDE.

The identification of distance offerings is determined by a School's administering a survey to identify the need for and interest in a course/programme being available through a distance format. There are clearly established steps in programme development that have been established for face-to-face programmes: many of these have been adopted without modification for distance programmes. However, the survey assists in determining the best modality for a distance programme - online, face-to-face in a satellite setting, multimedia, paper-based or a blending of the possible modalities.

It is very important to allow sufficient lead time to translate a face-to-face programme to a different modality. Time is needed to promote as well as develop the programme.

#### **Employment of industry-based Advisory Boards to inform programme content and evaluation**

Advisory Committees are important in both programme development and quality assurance at UTech; therefore, the University requires that Schools involve their Advisory Committees in planning for distance offerings. Some courses - e.g. those with workshop or laboratory components - are more difficult to translate to distance offerings, but may be able to incorporate workplace-based (cooperative learning) experiences as part of the course. This blending of classroom (whether face-to-face, online, in multimedia formats or some combination of the possibilities) and workplace experiences can accommodate some of the learning experiences not readily offered in a virtual environment. The inclusion of Advisory Committees in decisions about whether to offer a course (or programme) by distance can increase interest in cooperative education approaches as well as distance approaches.

## **Academic and administrative policy development and implementation support**

The University learned very quickly that the policies addressing face-to-face offerings need to be modified to address distance offerings adequately, no matter what the distance modality. There need to be unambiguous policies related to timetabling of classes, class participation, student assignments and assessment, submission of assignments, scheduled opportunities for tutor consultation, and course and instructor evaluation that are different from face-to-face class requirements. These policies need to be developed, approved, and made available to students and instructors alike - online, in a hard copy or both. The availability of these rules and regulations is extremely useful for setting parameters within which learners and staff alike can operate.

## **Establishment of University-wide programme standards and requirements**

UTech requires a detailed syllabus in standardised format for a distance course, as it does for a face-to-face course. Although the distance syllabus outline may address content similar to that covered by its face-to-face sister, there will necessarily be differences in approach and requirements - e.g. in how and where assignments will be collected/submitted and how student assessment will be carried out. UTech sees the syllabus outline as the contract between the tutor (the institution) and the learner. That syllabus outline needs to include the general content topics and time to be allocated to each, grading standards, the required number of pieces of coursework and their value, and the examination strategy. These standards should be comparable to those expected of face-to-face students; however, distance learning offers a singular opportunity to present the course through a problem-based approach. If the learner is expected to work with others in the course (either on line or in a discussion forum) to resolve specific problems that require reading and written commentary, the tutor may be able to track the development of the learner's knowledge and skills more readily than in a face-to-face classroom. Specific requirements of contributions to on line discussions (once the tutor has ascertained a means of ensuring that each learner is actually the person contributing) are an important part of the quality assurance system for distance courses with an online component.

## **Development and implementation of appropriate support systems for both instructors and students**

"Support" implies all kinds of institutional response to both learner and instructor. For the learner enrolled in a distance programme, for example, perhaps the most significant challenge is coping with the feeling of isolation and alienation s/he experiences. To address this reality, all UTech distance offerings have built-in "red flag" alerts. An important quality assurance requirement in each distance education course is that a tutor contact a learner who has not been in communication for five days (two classes) in a course where online communication is required. This support can assist the learner to feel that s/he is not alone. While such a policy is unnecessary in a face-to-face course, UTech sees it as imperative for learner support in an online environment.

The tutor, on the other hand, must have the tools to do the job: s/he needs to have continual access to a computer and/or a telephone to stay in touch with the learners; s/he needs initial training in how to approach, respond to, track and evaluate distance learners as opposed to face-to-face learners. This training needs to provide the tutor with the experience of being an online learner. UTech conducts training for new distance instructors in course design and modification, assessment and student support in an online environment using the software they will have to use when designing and conducting their courses online. The experience of being an online learner is much more valuable than reading about it.

## **Recruitment/upgrading of Faculty specialised in their content area(s) and relevant instructional techniques**

When moving face-to-face instructors to a distance environment, UTech solicited volunteers for its distance projects. UTech believes that it is highly unlikely that a lecturer can be a good online or distance instructor through force: there must be an initial curiosity about the modality and willingness to experiment. The University's criteria for participating in a distance project are that the lecturer must volunteer for the assignment, be willing to undergo training in distance methods and course conversion, attend support group workshops during the first offering of the course in the distance modality, be evaluated by the students and conduct an evaluation of the experience at the end of the course. These requirements are the skeletal quality assurance requirements to match the comparable face-to-face quality assurance experience. Learner achievement is measured against the stated learning outcomes for each course to ensure that the course modality(ies) is/are not placing the learners at a disadvantage in comparison to traditional face-to-face learners..

## **Lobbying for/identification of sufficient financial allocations to support programme offerings**

Conversion to quality distance learning courses in a face-to-face institution is not easy or inexpensive. It is a myth that distance education offered to relatively small groups of persons costs less money than offering the same courses face-to-face: a good distance programme will cost as much if not more than a face-to-face programme, although

the institution does not need to build brick and mortar classrooms in which to offer it.

Because UTech is funded by the Jamaican government, there is little likelihood of getting special funding to support distance offerings separate from face-to-face offerings. However, the University has been fortunate to be part of two distance programmes that have external funding. These development projects are assisting UTech faculty and administration to get their training and grounding in online strategies and course development with support from international agencies. The important factor in this kind of situation is to ensure that those trained through the projects are willing to train others when they have completed their project experience.

### **Regular student evaluation of their instructors and courses**

Learners' regular evaluation of their instructors and courses is as much a requirement in distance courses as in face-to-face courses. Whether the course is useful, is meeting its learning outcomes, is at a sufficiently challenging level of offering, and whether the instructor is meeting his/her obligations and communicating effectively with the learners is the purpose of all instructor/course evaluation. UTech has designed an online evaluation instrument that the instructor may request the students to complete at any point during the course to get immediate feedback on how the course is proceeding and how the students are responding to it. These evaluations are required in both face-to-face and distance courses. The University is converting from a paper-based evaluation to an online evaluation in Academic Year 2006-07.

### **Standardised, systematic performance evaluation of academic staff**

Staff evaluations are conducted annually by each instructor's supervisor. At present, the challenge is to have these supervisors trained in distance offerings so that they are knowledgeable enough to evaluate those offering distance and/or blended courses.

### **Regular applications for accreditation of programmes to the national accrediting body (University Council of Jamaica) and international professional bodies.**

Currently, some criteria for UCJ programme accreditation address the quality of face-to-face offerings but not the unique characteristics of distance offerings. However, the UCJ does recruit teams of persons who are experts in the content field for each accreditation visit; UTech should be able to request that one member of the accreditation team be a specialist in distance education where the programme is offered by distance or blended modalities. It is important that distance programmes not be measured according to face-to-face criteria alone: some of the criteria are irrelevant, and some important aspects of the distance offering would not be addressed.

### **A FINAL WORD**

UTech is moving slowly toward dual mode offerings; however, its insistence on maintaining its quality assurance standards and accreditation means that when it becomes dual mode, its graduates will be accepted anywhere for work or advanced study.

Now boasting three campuses (in Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago and Jamaica) and a variety of tutorial centres in islands designated as non-campus territories, the UWI has traditionally been seen as "the University" in the English-speaking Caribbean. As a regional institution, the UWI has been engaged in variations of distance education for more than 25 years.

Indeed, the Caribbean School of Architecture at UTech is the identified regional institution training architects for the English-speaking Caribbean.

The greatest challenge in this ambitious list of responsibilities, however, has been the garnering of sufficient funds to support innovative approaches to academic offerings in a climate where government allocations are diminishing and student fees are capped in the context of a public university. It needs to be recognised that funding allocations affect all aspects of quality assurance and, therefore, threaten to affect accreditation applications.

For example, undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in Architecture, Technical Education and Engineering; undergraduate degrees in Computing and Information Technology, Land Surveying, GIS, Quantity Surveying and Urban and Regional Planning, Hospitality and Tourism Management, Food Service Management, Health Sciences, Medical Technology, Pharmacy, Dietetics and Nutrition, Child Care and Development, Banking, Auditing, Construction Engineering Management and Coaching.

Face-to-face offerings of on-campus courses at remote locations.

Inaccurate assumptions about computer access among the target learning group, for example, may mean that an online offering of a programme will not attract any clients.

While mediated simulations of some practical experiences are available, in many cases these are too expensive for a small developing country public university to afford; therefore we have to look for innovative alternatives.

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