

**Assessing the Quality of Distance Education:
The Case of the University of the West Indies**

Peter Whiteley

*Office of the Board for Undergraduate Studies,
University of the West Indies, Mona campus, Jamaica*

Abstract

The University of the West Indies (UWI) delivers its programmes on three campuses, in Barbados, Jamaica and Trinidad, by distance education techniques and through regional Tertiary Level Institutions (TLIs). UWI is working to expand access to its programmes and one strategy involves increasing the range and number of programmes offered through the Distance Education Centre (UWIDEC), which was established in 1996. The Chancellor's Commission on Governance mandated the development and implementation of a full system of quality audit and quality assurance at UWI. The Commission's report led to the establishment of a Board for Undergraduate Studies (BUS), which began its duties in August 1996. One of the main duties of BUS is to plan and direct the evolution of the UWI system of quality audit and quality assurance. This paper notes the aims of presenting programmes by distance education at UWI; outlines the quality assurance and quality audit systems at UWI; highlights possible criteria for the assessment of distance education programmes; and considers implications for the further development of distance education programmes.

Introduction

The University of the West Indies (UWI) was established in 1947 as the University College of the West Indies, a college of the University of London. UWI received its first students in October 1948 and became an independent, degree-granting institution in 1962. It serves the English-speaking Caribbean and is supported by fifteen Caribbean governments (see Appendix 1). UWI consists of three campuses, in Barbados, Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago, a Centre for Hotel and Tourism Management in the Bahamas and University Centres in the noncampus

countries (NCCs). UWI's programmes are delivered on-campus, by distance education methodologies and in collaboration with regional Tertiary Level Institutions (TLIs). The total number of students registering at UWI has risen from about 10,800 students in 1986 to over 20,000 in 1999 (UWI, 1999a).

UWI and the Expansion of Access

Although, as noted above, there has been a rapid expansion of student numbers at UWI the growth of registration numbers from the various contributing countries has not been equal and

consequently there is now an 'imbalance' in favour of the campus countries. Figures for 1997/98 indicate that student registration from campus countries was 93 percent of the total, with just 7 percent of the registered students coming from the NCCs (UWI, 1999a), and these proportions have not changed significantly for some years. The campus countries, however, contain only about 78 percent of the region's population and the NCCs about 22 percent. These figures strongly support arguments for increased access for potential students in the NCCs, through distance education or otherwise. Even within campus countries (and particularly in Jamaica) the need to make better provision for potential students who, for example, have considerable family commitments or are unable to stop working for an extended period for financial reasons, has been recognized. UWI is addressing these issues in several ways.

UWI and Articulation with other TLIs

Whiteley (in press) describes the efforts of the university to become closer partners of the regional TLIs. UWI delivers its programmes to a growing extent through these institutions and this mode of delivery was encouraged by the report from a major internal study (UWI 1994). The report argued that there was a need for greater articulation between UWI and regional TLIs, with particular reference to increasing access for students from NCCs. The Tertiary Level Institutions Unit (TLIU) was set up in 1996 to be responsible for managing the links with the TLIs, as until then articulation agreements between UWI and TLIs had grown in a relatively unplanned fashion. The forms of articulation now include being an affiliated institution or being an associated institution with a quasi-affiliation arrangement, a franchising arrangement, a validation arrangement or with a qualification from the TLI being granted matriculation or advanced placement status

(OBUS, 1997). These arrangements can be generally understood as "mutually adjusting programmes at UWI and other TLIs so that students can continue from one to another with the minimum of delay" (UWI, 1995: 12). Roberts (1999) suggests that the diversity of Caribbean tertiary education allows for appropriate responses to local needs. She argues, however, that coordination through a variety of articulation models is also useful to facilitate regional mobility for employment or further studies.

UWI and Distance Education

The regional nature of UWI and the expense of travelling among the contributing countries lead naturally to the consideration of distance education as one way of increasing access. Peters (1998) notes the following general advantages of distance education for universities:

- University education becomes less expensive
- Overcrowded campuses can be relieved
- People are able to study while continuing to work
- People are encouraged to gain further qualifications
- New groups of students are formed
- Lifelong learning has a greater chance of occurring
- More people are able to take part in the cultural life
- Greater democratization of society may occur

The UWI Distance Teaching Experiment (UWIDITE) began in 1983 with lectures and tutorials being presented through tele-

conferencing using an interactive radio communication system. By 1986 students had access to programmes in Social Sciences, Arts, Education and Law through this facility. Since then it has expanded greatly, there are now over thirty sites in fifteen countries and in 1996 UWI established the UWI Distance Education Centre (UWIDEC) with a considerably broader mandate, having adopted a policy of being a fully dual mode institution in 1992. Jennings (1999) provides a useful history of the development of UWIDITE. It has been suggested that UWIDEC is the “window of opportunity for many mature adults who want to achieve a higher education degree” (OBUS, 1999a).

Other Possibilities

Apart from the further development of links with TLIs and the establishment of UWIDEC it has been suggested that more financial scholarships for students should be provided by UWI, as the number has remained constant for many years. It has been noted that recruiters in Barbados, Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago find places and secure scholarships for Caribbean students in high quality educational institutions in the United States and Canada (OBUS, 1999b). Another suggestion is that UWI consider granting the status of university colleges to selected regional TLIs, in a manner analogous to UWI being a University College of the University of London from 1947 to 1962 (Beckles, 1999). These possibilities are not discussed further in this paper.

The UWI Quality Strategy

The Chancellor’s Commission on Governance (UWI, 1994) mandated the development and implementation of a full system of quality audit and quality assurance at UWI. The Board for Undergraduate Studies (BUS) began work in August 1996 and one of its main duties is the

development and implementation of the system of quality audit and assurance. The Office of the Board for Undergraduate Studies (OBUS) carries out the policies of BUS. A recent publication, UWI Quality Strategy, outlines the quality assurance system at UWI (OBUS, 2000a). The information in this document is divided into four sections on: the university, the students, the academic programme and quality assurance and quality audit.

The University

It is noted that, consequent on the publication by the university, its faculties and departments of mission statements, strategic plans, aims and objectives and the like, there must be a related and thorough system of reporting. These reports allow the university to demonstrate to its various stakeholders (students, parents, employers, regional governments) how and to what degree the short-, medium- and longer-term objectives are being achieved. The structure of the various councils, boards and committees that monitor and direct the university’s work is also outlined in the UWI Quality Strategy.

The Students

The Charter of Principles and Responsibilities (the Student Charter) outlines what a student can expect from the university. The university has a policy of being student-centred and student-friendly and this policy informs all of its procedures. The rights of UWI students to the resources, in the broadest sense, that are necessary for the attainment of their learning objectives are described in the Student Charter. The Charter also argues that the rights and privileges accorded to its students go hand in hand with corresponding duties, obligations and responsibilities and outlines behaviours that are inappropriate or damaging to the university and

its members. In further pursuit of its policy and to help provide an adequate learning experience UWI now has several methods that ensure that its students receive adequate information, counselling and support during their time at UWI.

The Academic Programme

In all educational institutions there needs to be a set of quality assurance methods directly associated with the academic programme. At UWI matriculation requirements are set by BUS and it periodically reviews policy with regard to these. The members of academic staff in departments are the usual source of proposals for new courses or programmes and all proposals undergo a thorough process of scrutiny by colleagues throughout the university. Campus-based proposals are then sent to the relevant Faculty Board and Academic Board for approval. New programmes are also given final approval by BUS. All regional and cross-campus programmes have to be approved by BUS. Each department has a Curriculum Review Committee to review the curriculum, consider the modes of assessment and analyse examination results. The committee may also receive feedback on the courses and programmes from students, employers and graduates. The conduct of the examination system is also subject to rigorous control at UWI.

Quality Audit and Quality Assurance at UWI

In recent years most universities have developed formal systems of quality assurance and quality audit. The term quality assurance at UWI relates to processes designed to more directly monitor and enhance the quality of the learning experience of UWI students. A major component of the quality assurance process at UWI is the series of quality assurance reviews of the teaching of the disciplines that OBUS

undertakes in a five-year cycle. The academic staff within a discipline on a campus undertakes a self-assessment exercise and produces a report on this exercise. The work in the discipline in the department, section or unit is considered under the headings Curriculum, Teaching and Learning, Student Profile, Assessment and Learning Outcomes, Resources for Teaching and Learning and Quality Assurance and Enhancement. Within the self-assessment report qualitative and quantitative data and information on each of these aspects are presented. The academic staff is guided in the work of the review by material produced by OBUS in which is a series of questions that the report attempts to answer (OBUS, 1999c).

The overall goal of the self assessment is for the academic staff of a discipline to determine the extent to which the stated aims and objectives of the teaching of their discipline are being realized and identify issues that have an impact on the learning experience of their students. While there is descriptive material in a self-assessment report, the primary aim of the self assessment is to understand, analyse and evaluate, not merely to describe or defend. The report may also guide future planning within the discipline.

A review team is appointed and receives the self-assessment report before visiting the campus. On campus the team meets with academic and support staff, undergraduate and postgraduate students, graduates, employers of the graduates and faculty and campus management personnel and inspects the relevant facilities. The review team examines other documentation and data and then submits its report. The team is guided in its work by material produced by OBUS (OBUS, 2000b).

At UWI quality audits are undertaken to investigate performance in a particular aspect

of the university's work. A quality audit can be a review of the quality assurance procedures of a department or faculty. Such an audit can be useful, particularly to the professional faculties (Law, Medical Sciences and Engineering) and the documentation needed for a quality audit is considerable – an indicative list is given in Appendix 2. This list can, however, also be useful in identifying activities that need to be pursued and maintained within a full quality assurance programme. Alternatively, a quality audit may be concerned with the monitoring of the procedures used in the administration of the university (with particular reference to relations with its students) and with other issues such as the Summer School, the operation of the libraries and so on.

Quality Assurance in Distance Education

The Open University in the United Kingdom is one of the premier and largest universities offering its programmes in a distance mode. In the 1980s the Open University used mainly 'conventional' methods to assure academic standards. These included, for instance, the use of external examiners, accreditation by professional bodies, the use of rigorous appointment procedures for staff and the use of external opinion when preparing courses. At that time the university placed little emphasis on course presentation and student services. Since then it has recognized the need to include other aspects of the delivery of its programmes, including, for example, the quality of customer service and staff development (Mills and Paul, 1993).

UWI and Distance Education

Koul (1999) has raised concerns about aspects of the operation of distance education at UWI.

He considers that there is a need to assess the university's human and material resources and the extent and variety of educational demand it has to meet and organize its funds and resources to satisfy optimally both demand and use of the available resources. He argues for a "reasonable degree of re-engineering – curricula, financial management, regulations and operations must change to match differing learner populations and their aspirations, (and) varied delivery systems" (Koul, 1999, 111).

At UWI the curricula of courses and programmes presented through distance education techniques are subject to review under its quality assurance review programme. Koul's concern may imply the need for a separate audit of distance education provision at UWI. Further, the nature and foci of the quality assurance reviews is such that any evaluation of distance education provision requires the identification of the various other criteria that reflect the particular nature of distance education more closely.

Criteria for Assessing Distance Education Programmes

In the context of the management of 'open' systems of education, Freeman (1997) makes a useful distinction between monitoring and evaluation. He uses monitoring to mean activities that are formative and of benefit to current learners and evaluation to mean activities that lead to action that will benefit future learners. He also notes that different levels of monitoring are possible and that different comparisons may be made. For example, the programme, course, tutor or learner may be monitored and comparisons may be made with other similar programmes, courses, tutors or learners or, alternatively, against set (external or internal) standards.

Programmes at UWI that are delivered by distance education techniques should be evaluated according to the criteria used for other programmes as well as other more specific criteria. In the context of this conference the suggestions that follow are expressly for discussion, modification, addition and deletion. They are intended to reflect some criteria that may not usually be used in a review of a department's work on campus, but some overlap is to be expected. The criteria are derived from the distance education literature and from reports of the experience of UWI in distance education provision. The criteria suggested are divided into academic, administrative, technological, and financial criteria (UWI, 1999b).

Academic Criteria

Timeliness of development of courses and course materials

Timeliness of setting assignments and examinations

Quality of materials provided for students

Student data: access rates by group (e.g. age, country, sex), dropout rate, throughput rate, pass rates, grade distribution, etc.

Graduate destination data

Distance education and staff work loads

Administrative Criteria

Efficiency of communication amongst administrative centres

Efficiency of distribution of materials and examination papers

Response time to applicant and student inquiries

Response time to decisions made within institution

Technological Criteria

Appropriateness of the technologies used

Efficiency of the technologies used

Financial Criteria

Clarity of relationship between distance education and other aspects of institution

Adequacy of funding

- for course and material development costs
- for course delivery, including tutorials and other student support
- for local centre staff

Developing Distance Education Programmes

There are clear implications of the lists in the previous section. While distance education programmes allow students to access educational programmes that would otherwise be out of their financial reach, the development and delivery of such programmes is not cheap to the institution, if an appropriate quality is to be maintained. An institution that decides to provide such programmes must plan so as to allow equivalence in the level of the student experience to be achieved.

To hypothesize two simple examples in the context of UWI:

- While the rapid return of assignments on a campus may be relatively unproblematic (they can be left in the departmental office for students to collect) much more is involved when the students are resident in, say, thirteen countries across the Caribbean. It takes time, personnel and money to prepare and send the assignments to the other countries and the time for receipt, by the student, may then be further increased

if the student does not have easy or regular access to the University Centre.

- At UWI an examiner has to be present in the examination room for the first half-an-hour of all examinations to deal with any difficulties. The regulations require that the examiner be available by telephone for other examination centres. Thus if there is an error on an examination paper it is considerably more demanding when there are students sitting the examination in centres across the Caribbean – or even within one country.

This author strongly supports the expansion of the provision of UWI's programmes through distance education methodologies, as the campuses appear to have reached their limits for any expansion of numbers. Any expansion in distance education provision must, however, be adequately resourced; such adequacy does not yet appear to have been reached.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: Countries contributing to the University of the West Indies

Campus countries: Barbados, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago.

Non-campus countries: Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Belize, British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands, Dominica, Grenada, Montserrat, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines.

APPENDIX 2: Indicative list of documentation for a UWI Quality Audit

Strategic Plans/Aims/Objectives

1. Statements of Aims and Objectives of the Department/Faculty
2. Department/Campus/University Strategic Plans
3. Campus and Faculty Operational plans
4. Annual Departmental and Faculty reports

Course/Programmes

5. Course outlines
6. Department and Faculty handbooks
7. Reports on the proposals for new courses/programmes
8. Minutes of curriculum/course review committee meetings

Staff Meetings

9. Minutes of Departmental staff meetings
10. Minutes of subject group committees
11. Minutes of support staff/technical staff meetings
12. Minutes of Faculty Board meetings

Student Feedback

13. Statement of student participation in committees/boards of department/Faculty

14. Minutes of Staff/Student Liaison Committee meetings
15. Responses and action regarding student concerns
16. Student course assessment data
17. Student statistics (course pass rates, grade distributions, throughput rates, class of degrees awarded, etc.); evidence of use in monitoring the teaching/learning process

Graduate Destination Data

18. Reports on destination data of graduates

External Opinion

19. Reports of surveys of graduates
20. Reports of surveys of employers
21. Reports of External Examiners and/or University Examiners
22. Responses of department and Faculty to these reports

Staffing and Staff Development

23. Reports of annual academic staff appraisals by Head of Department
24. Reports on performance of technical staff
25. Staff development policies for both full-time and part-time staff
26. Reports of staff development activities

Quality Assurance

27. Departmental/Faculty Quality Assurance handbook
28. Self-Assessment reports
29. Quality Assurance Review Team reports
30. External Accreditation Reports
31. Minutes of meetings with OBUS; other reports of Quality Assurance activities