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## Benchmarking Matters

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# Preface

ALVIN WINT
*Pro Vice Chancellor, Board for Undergraduate Studies*

In a 2003 task force report, "Strategic Challenges Confronting the Mona Campus of UWI", the authors made the point that "many staff at UWI, Mona, appropriately, resist the idea of taking the language and concepts of the marketplace too far. At one level, students are certainly customers of universities, but universities ought not to be in the business of selling degrees, nor of responding only to short-term market demand."

At the same time as there is this appropriate resistance to taking the language and concepts of the marketplace too far, there is the recognition that the University of the West Indies (UWI) and universities all around the world are facing an environment in which there are greater demands for accountability, and there has been a substantial increase in competition, from other regions and non-traditional sources. Against the background of increases in competition, one of the challenges faced by UWI, and higher education institutions globally, is how to improve the quality of the academic experience for students, the learning focus of students and staff, and the societal impact of the university through the use of practices that have been developed in other areas of endeavour, such as business, while, at the same time, retaining the distinctive role that universities within a society are uniquely equipped to perform.

This challenge is the focus of this edition of the *UWI Quality Forum*, which examines the issue of benchmarking in higher education and at the UWI. As a number of the authors of articles in this volume point out, benchmarking, while originating in the fields of topography and carpentry, was popularized almost three decades ago as a process by which businesses sought to identify,

from a structured assessment of comparable institutions, best practices that lead to superior performance. Implicit in the concept of benchmarking is intimate knowledge of processes and practices within one's own institution, selection of appropriate comparator institutions and inter-institutional performance assessment, and identification of practices and processes that have causal links to performance.

Several of the more successful Caribbean business organizations have been part of a global trend towards benchmarking in business. In a related vein, the UWI has begun participating in a global trend towards benchmarking in higher education. Thus, for example, the *Mona Strategic Challenges Report* benchmarked the level of cited research output at UWI, Mona, against seven universities on six continents; faculties across UWI are developing benchmarks and standards for evaluation and promotion; UWI's internal quality assurance process effectively benchmarks each department being reviewed against institutions familiar to the review team's leader, who is normally an external academic; UWI senior administrative staff are benchmarking their administrative support services against those of other institutions; and there is a movement towards internal benchmarking within the UWI system as efforts at improving quality are leading to internal searches for best practices adopted by a particular UWI campus.

Even as UWI is moving in the direction of incorporating benchmarking into is mode of operation, there is a recognition of the possible pitfalls. The papers in this volume help to identify the state of benchmarking in higher education and at UWI, while recognizing both the benefits and the pitfalls.

Perry, for example, raises the critical issue of which are the appropriate comparator institutions for UWI and by whose standards should the institution be judged, while he advocates that in its efforts to simulate a process that has been popularized in the world of business the institution should not lose sight of the "real business of the academy".

Perkins echoes a similar theme, devoting her paper to a discussion of a "philosophy of benchmarking" and advocating that UWI engage in a structured process of benchmarking which is incorporated into the regular planning cycle of the institution and the management of key processes. Her injunction is timely in that UWI has just completed its latest quinquennial strategic plan-

ning exercise, which involved a process of intense introspection, analysis, internal consultation and an assessment of the perspectives of its "clients" in an effort to identify a consensually determined vision for the future of the institution that was responsive to the needs of the constituent groups served by the university. This plan seeks to institutionalize a process for developing performance indicators by benchmarking these indicators against international norms. It also advocates a greater level of institutional research, which is critical to effective benchmarking.

Edwards-Henry, Chisholm and Campbell continue the discussion focusing specifically on the benchmarking of teaching and learning. Edward-Henry suggests that the benchmarking of teaching and learning should focus on five key issues: teacher qualifications, use of teaching methodologies, teaching support, student experience and assessment. Chisholm makes a case for benchmarking to be used to identify best practices in teaching and learning centres, with a particular focus on learner-centred approaches and accountability. Campbell considers how UWI can benefit from identifying, and learning from, best practices within the institution by discussing the case of the transformation of the learning process surrounding one of the regional foundations courses, which occurred on the St Augustine campus of the UWI.

Anglin and McLean et al. extend the focus to two critical support areas. Anglin discusses the importance of benchmarking information technology services at the UWI, particularly through a reliance on external "best-in-class" benchmarking, while recognizing also the role of internal benchmarking. Finally, McLean et al. extend the discussion of international standards to the critical area of library services, advocating the use at UWI of the international standards developed by the Association of College and Research Libraries.

In sum, the papers in this volume identify the critical role that benchmarking has come to play in higher education and presents the case for the use of benchmarking at the UWI in a manner that searches for internal and global best practice within a "fitness for purpose" model of quality, which defines the UWI purpose as enhancing its role as a learning institution in which the learning experiences of students and staff redound to the benefit of the West Indian region the university is dedicated to serve.

# Benchmarking

## The University of the West Indies at Sixty

ANTHONY M. PERRY

## Introduction

After sixty years of serving the region, the University of the West Indies (UWI), has more than "come of age". The UWI boasts being the only university serving the region; several prime ministers and other political leaders are graduates; professionals in the field of medicine, law and engineering have been nurtured at the Cave Hill, Mona and St Augustine campuses; and the university has produced other outstanding graduates in science and agriculture, education and humanities, literatures and the arts. So why, then, should the issue of benchmarking enter into the academic discourse in this anniversary year? By whose standards have we come to judge the excellence of the UWI graduate? Should UWI be measured against the universities that were started at the same time as colleges of the University of London? Should benchmark processes of the UWI be aligned with the practices at the Universities of Accra (Ghana), Ibadhan (Nigeria) and Makerere (Nigeria)? Or should the UWI look to best practices in the colleges and universities in United States and Canada at which students in the post-independence era of the Commonwealth Caribbean have studied?

Internal quality assurance mechanisms within the university have laid the groundwork for not only recognizing excellence within the academy but also establishing a benchmark by which other institutions can measure excellence.

Yet the bigger question that ought to be asked if the UWI does not wish to be perceived as engaging in academic snobbery or relying primarily on a reputation cemented by years of service to the region is: By whose standards shall it be judged? Should the UWI set its own standards for all its academic programmes? Should its current quality assurance policies provide the guidelines for setting the benchmark for every teaching discipline?

## Benchmarking the UWI

Benchmarking the UWI makes a statement beyond measures of quality assurance and enhancement. Benchmarking suggests that the institution can be measured against any of its kind regionally and internationally. Yet, more importantly, the institution, and in this case the UWI, can be that benchmark in specific disciplines and research for which it has become renowned.

It could be argued that any institution that has been in the business of knowledge creation, training doctors, engineers, lawyers and other professionals for more than half a century, must have set a standard of excellence comparable to the best universities anywhere. Additionally, the UWI has demonstrated excellence in so many areas of teaching and research that it could well establish benchmarking models for those areas. Acclaimed writers, educators, economists and scientists who have been recognized for their contribution to their disciplines continue to set standards of excellence as mentioned in the many quality assurance review reports. But despite the UWI's good reputation and long history, improving performance in all areas continues to be an important part of the vision and mission of the university.

Benchmarking is an important concept in higher education, especially in the United Kingdom, Europe, Australia and North America where institutions learn from each other and share best practices. Yet while the term

**Benchmarking suggests that the institution can be measured against any of its kind regionally and internationally. Yet, more importantly, the institution, and in this case the UWI, can be that benchmark in specific disciplines and research for which it has become renowned.**

"benchmarking" is relatively new within the academy, the business of learning and sharing has always been an important part of the life of universities. Benchmarking universities requires a formula that will make comparisons with institutions of the same "kind" and the subsequent interpretation that takes into account the peculiar circumstances that exist within each institution. But is benchmarking a comparative analysis of how institutions measure up to each other in terms of intake and graduation rates, the systems that support learning, and management efficiencies? Is it a matter of learning from others or copying best practices?

Traditionally, universities contribute to and participate in numerous collaborative ventures such as student and staff exchanges, jointly hosting international conferences, research projects, professional associations, and academics serving as external examiners and peer reviewers. There is almost an expectation that academics across geographical and political boundaries will offer their services to colleagues in areas of mutual concern, both academic and non-academic. Why, therefore, should there not be comparisons made with the universities that provide support to each other?

In an extensive examination of benchmarking, the Commonwealth Higher Education Management Service published *Benchmarking in Higher Education: An International Review*. The organization reviewed "developments in the application of the concept of benchmarking within higher education, with particular reference to the United Kingdom, Europe, Australia, and North America" (CHEMS 1998, 2). Schofield's contribution to the publication provides an insightful introduction to benchmarking. He pointed out that

> with the emphasis on collegiality and the recognition of the international role of the university such desires have traditionally manifested themselves in many ways: professional associations, both academic and non-academic, meeting to share common interests; numerous visits by delegations from one higher education system to examine another; professional bodies working collaboratively with institutions in supporting academic provision and mediating standards; and where formal quality assessment or accreditation systems exist, their ultimate dependence upon the maintenance of the goodwill of universities often by providing their own staff to take part as assessors of other universities. (Schofield 1998)

# What Is Benchmarking?

Benchmarking was developed in the late 1970s at Xerox Corporation in response to increased competition. As adopted in higher education, it is used for improving administrative processes as well as instructional models at colleges and universities by examining processes and models at other schools and adapting their techniques and approaches (Alstete 1997, citing Chafee and Sherr 1992 and Clark 1993). However, the nomenclature poses some difficulties as it varies considerably between both different approaches and different practitioners. Schofield (1998, 11) points out that "within quality assurance and enhancement literature the term [benchmarking] has come to have a set of meanings somewhat removed from what is generally recognised as a 'benchmark', which is normally considered as a standard by which an item can be measured or judged". Fielden (1997) notes that in higher education many people confuse benchmarking with collecting statistics or performance indicators and complain about the poor cost-effective benefit of data-collection exercises. Yet the difficulties go beyond definitions. Benchmarking has been associated with ranking and league tables of university performance used by *Maclean's* magazine in Canada and *US News and World Report* in the United States. The use of comparative statistics has provided these privately produced reports that inform higher education institutions of their rating and often act as a stimulus for organizational improvement and recruitment strategies in a market-driven education environment.

Some definitions of benchmarking are as follows:

- A self-improvement tool for organizations that allows them to compare themselves with others
- A way of finding and adopting best practices
- The open and collaborative evaluation of services and processes with the aim of emulating best available practices
- The process of continuously comparing and measuring an organization with business leaders anywhere in the world to gain information, which will help the organization take action to improve its performance

Other distinctions are made between what benchmarking is and is not.

Spendolini (1992) identified benchmarking as a continuous process and not a one-off event; a process that provides valuable information rather than simple answers; a process of learning from others rather than copying ideas or practices; a time-consuming and labour-intensive process rather than being quick and easy; and a viable tool for improving virtually any business activity rather than a buzzword or fad.

There have been improvement strategies and techniques such as total quality management (TQM), continuous quality improvement (CQI) and business process re-engineering (BPR). ISO 9000 (International Organization for Standardization), now widely used in industry and commerce, could arguably be yet another benchmarking designation. Kempner (1993) sees benchmarking as an ongoing, systematic process for measuring and comparing the work processes of one organization to those of another, by bringing an external focus to internal activities, functions or operations. According to Alstete (1997), the goal of benchmarking is to "provide key personnel, in charge of processes, with an external standard for measuring quality and cost of internal activities, and to help identify where opportunities for improvement may reside". Alstete (1997) associates benchmarking with the concept of quality. He believes that benchmarking is fundamental in enabling the institution to learn how to improve. Lofstrom (2002), in addressing issues of best practices in European higher education, noted that benchmarking is a method for evaluation and development that facilitates systematic organizational learning and a systematic approach to learning by comparing. Kempner (1993) posed the following questions that benchmarking ought to address:

1. How well are we doing compared to others?
2. How good do we want to be?
3. Who is doing the best?
4. How do they do it?
5. How can we adapt what they do to our institution?
6. How can we be better than the rest?

As pertinent as these questions are, there is another question that ought to be asked: With whom should the UWI be compared? Which benchmark tools should be used to measure quality at the university?

Benchmarking processes have proliferated throughout the United States in business and industry. Among universities in the United States, the predominant agent in benchmarking is probably the National Association of College and University Business Officers (NACUBO), which identified approximately six hundred benchmarks in around 150 colleges and universities in the 1990s (Alstete 1997). The NACUBO covers general registration, development, payroll and purchasing. Across the border in Canada, benchmarking tends to be ad hoc in nature and informal in approach, leading Farquhar (1998, 31) to conclude that benchmarking in North American higher education is not true benchmarking: "it is typically the systematic generation of management information that can produce performance indicators and may lead to the identification of benchmarks, but it does not often extend to benchmarking by identifying best practices and adapting them to achieve continuous improvement in one's own institutional context, and even when it does, it seldom goes 'outside the box' of one's peer organization". However, there is evidence that benchmarking is also alive and well in UK universities in academic and administrative domains. The Quality Assurance Agency, and its predecessor the Higher Education Funding Council of England, suggest that there are significant benefits that accrue from benchmarking. The Quality Assurance Agency, for example, has established and published subject benchmark statements across colleges and universities in the United Kingdom as an important component of quality assurance. The Commonwealth University Management Benchmarking Club, formed in 1995 by the Commonwealth Higher Education Management Service, has as one of its purposes measuring and promoting excellence in management, recognizing the importance of benchmarking as an emerging dimension in the experiences of universities.

The literature, however, does not point to unanimity in the nature or scope of benchmarking within universities in the United Kingdom, Europe or Australia. Concerns over policy, methodology, cost and documentation are constantly debated. And while universities in Europe recognize that competition among higher education institutions necessitates greater levels of efficiency and transparency in their operation, the challenge that they face is that not all universities have a common set of indices or strict patterns of benchmarking. Definitional problems also factor into the discourse.

Matters of application have both conceptual and practical difficulties. Authors of several papers presented by the Commonwealth Higher Education Management Service identify the failure to move beyond the quantitative statistics and performance indicators and to explore the benchmarking process, which according to Schofield (1998) is at the heart of most of the misconceptions about benchmarking.

The work of the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU), through the work of the Benchmarking Club, points to more recent and pertinent processes of benchmarking among participating universities. An ACU team developed a framework to assess various aspects of the operation of universities, such as policy and strategy, monitoring and review, and communication. The Policy and Research Unit of the ACU outlines the approach, the application and outcome to the benchmarking process that relies heavily on the documentation provided by the university being assessed. Much like the "fitness for purpose" model adopted by the Quality Assurance Unit within the Office of the Board for Undergraduate Studies of the UWI, the assessment stage seeks to validate the evidence that the participating university sets out as its current practice. The context is not what ought to be, but rather what is. Thus, the outcome is defined by the extent to which the objectives are being achieved and also monitors whether "fitness for purpose" can continue as a model in the prevailing dynamism of higher education elsewhere. The work of the assessors in this process is critical. Their reports not only encapsulate all elements of good practice, but also take into account the agreed best practices arrived at with the member university. A "self-assessment mark" is matched against a "best practice element". According to the ACU (2005), this is "intended primarily for use as a guide to other members, enabling them to make contact and collaborate with a colleague from a university professing particular strength in a topic – academic or administrative – if they are seeking to make improvements in their own approach". Coming out of this process, the Policy and Research Unit speaks of a "true benchmarking" in the absence of predetermined benchmarks. By examining various systems, the Benchmarking Club recognizes that debating the issues and highlighting problems relating to context and culture can derive agreed universal benchmarks.

Pioneering work of the Benchmarking Club highlighted the successes in the arriving at inter-university comparison of various management processes, while at the same time underscoring the lack of unanimity from institutions about what is required to conduct the tasks and the varied cultural and contextual indicators when making comparisons. In attempting to develop and implement benchmarking methodologies within the UWI, it might be useful to examine benchmarking activities in the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada and the United States. But despite all the efforts to undertake benchmarking projects, some university administrators in the United Kingdom are deterred by cost in mapping their own progress in this area (Lund 1998). Data collection and record keeping of performance indicators pose a serious limitation for universities attempting to determine the extent of their effectiveness in areas such as estate management, student residence and security, for example. But how does all this data help the institutions to give priority to the quality of the learning and teaching strategies? Because the "real" business of the academy is to promote an intellectually stimulating and relevant learning and teaching environment to stir the imagination; to foster, recognize and reward innovation; and to commission research and development initiatives.

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# To Benchmark or not to Benchmark?

## A Question for UWI

ANNA KASAFI PERKINS

*Keep on the lookout for novel and interesting ideas that others have used successfully. Your idea has to be original only in its adaptation to the problem you're currently working on.*

*– Thomas Edison*

*[A benchmark is] a standard of excellence or achievement against which other similar things must be measured or judged.*

*– Sam Bookhart, former benchmarking manager at Dupont Fibers*

The notion of benchmarking is one that appears frequently at various levels of discourse at the University of the West Indies (UWI):

- In its *Strategic Plan, 2007–2012,* the university pledges "to develop more programmes of research of international repute, and benchmark performance against international norms" (UWI 2007, 26).
- The Quality Assurance Unit's training manual on tools and techniques features benchmarking as one of the tools for ensuring quality and observes that "a benchmark serves as a standard against which present performance can be measured. The best of the competition is identified with a view to understanding the way they produce quality" (OBUS 2003, 17).

- In several of the quality assurance review reports coming out of the Quality Assurance Unit, comments such as the following surface from time to time: "The weakness of this . . . is that individual departments and units . . . have no benchmark against which they can develop and evaluate their own aims and objectives."
- Similarly, in the 2005 report of the Department of Surgery, Radiology, Anaesthesia and Intensive Care, it is stated that "student assessments were monitored and members of the teaching staff who failed to achieve the benchmark of 4 out of a 5-point scale were counselled by the Head of Department and referred to the Staff Development Unit for remedial work".

It is clear from such references that benchmarking is already in use at the UWI. However, the frequency of such explicit and varied references to benchmarks and benchmarking begs for deepened understanding of the practice and how it is worthwhile to a regional higher education institution such as the UWI.

In reality, therefore, the question for UWI is not whether or not to benchmark: benchmarking is already a reality at the university, but there is little evidence of a formal and systematic practice. The question is perhaps better phrased: How should UWI go about benchmarking? Against whom should the university benchmark? At the same time, caution is necessary in adopting this tool without considering its limitations and the possibility of superficial implementation or interpretations. This article explores a "philosophy of benchmarking", questioning the nature, meaning and purpose of benchmarking as well as the deeper issue in the UWI context of whom the university should measure itself against. Of course, the assumption is that benchmarking is compatible with the model of quality – fitness for purpose – which is already ingrained in the university's culture. Benchmarking is therefore regarded as worthwhile for quality enhancement.

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## The Nature and Meaning of Benchmarking

There are numerous definitions of benchmarking as well as several categorizations of benchmarking types. A benchmark originally referred to "a mark on a permanent object indicating elevation and serving as a reference in topographical surveys and tidal observations" (USP 2004, 23). The concept of a point of reference continues today and a benchmark is often used to mean something that serves as a standard by which others may be measured or judged. The term has evolved to include not just the result achieved but also the processes by which it is achieved (benchmarking).

In higher education, as in other industries, benchmarking is one of the tools for monitoring performance and improvement. It is consistent with collegial contact and the exchange of ideas, which are normal parts of the higher education sector. It has a practical import in the changing face of higher education across the globe wherein increasing competition, demands for accountability, reduced state funds and higher volumes of information have impacted operations. Liston (1999, 98) describes benchmarking as a "quality management tool used when comparing one organization with another on some aspect of performance. Aspects of performance include processes, products and services. Searching to find information on these various aspects in which another organization excels, with the objective of finding ways in which to improve current performance, is benchmarking. A benchmark or standard can be established against which an organization's or institution's own performance can be assessed."

Benchmarking is therefore a beneficial process for higher education institutions. It assists in identifying gaps in performance, closes gaps between performance and expectations, and seeks fresh approaches that add innovation and new thinking as the institution learns from the best (OBUS 2003, 18). The goal of benchmarking is to provide key personnel in charge of processes with an external standard for measuring the quality and cost of internal activities, and to help identify where opportunities for improvement may reside (Alstete 1997). Indeed, companies that practice benchmarking tend to be proactive, externally focused and close to the markets in which they operate. To that end, they are able to achieve significant improvements in perform-

ance and competitiveness (Zairi 1992 in Consortium for Excellence 2003, 7).

Approaches to the use of benchmarking can be either strategic or operational. A strategic approach takes a high-level look and examines what is done, including the organization's business strategy, structure and operational costs. An operational benchmarking approach shifts the focus to how what is done is done. The strategic approach does not view benchmarking as simply a performance measurement but as a core business strategy to keep the organization at the competitive edge (Consortium for Excellence 2003, 4). The beginnings of both of these dimensions of benchmarking are visible in the case of the UWI, where the practice appears in both the current strategic plan and a quality assurance training module. However, it is clear that benchmarking has not yet become a core strategy in the wider UWI culture. Rather, the role it seems to play in both these documents is as an operational tool for improving particular aspects of the university's work. The challenge, therefore, is to integrate benchmarking into the fundamental operations of the university and ensure it is an ongoing process that analyses the data collected regularly in a longitudinal way.

## Types of Benchmarking

According to Dahlgaard, Kristensen and Khanji (1998), depending on the object of analysis, benchmarking is normally divided into three types:

1. Internal benchmarking
2. Competitor benchmarking
3. Functional/generic benchmarking

Liston, however, separates functional from generic making a fourfold typology. This is consistent across the benchmarking literature and is the typology that will be followed in this discussion.

Internal benchmarking compares similar processes in different parts of the same organization to identify better and best practices, for example, internal systems for reviewing curricula or throughput rates between faculties. Such internal benchmarking can be seen in the standard set at the UWI in assess-

ing teaching, where faculty is expected to obtain a minimum score of 3 in the student assessment. What is unclear is on what basis this standard was set. Of course, departments or faculties often seek results above the benchmark, as was demonstrated by the Department of Surgery above. UWI has a unique benefit in that internal benchmarking may be intra-campus as well as inter-campus. This kind of benchmarking is perhaps the least difficult to do as it does not involve obtaining data from competitors and it builds upon the bonds already existing in the organization. The encouragement of internal benchmarking could be championed by the Board for Undergraduate Studies in light of its mandate to ensure quality and deepen regionality.

Performance or competitive benchmarking compares the performance of one organization with that of a competitor on specific measurable terms. Similar processes, practices, performance measures, trends, directions and priorities are compared across the competitor organizations. Student outcomes, for example, throughput rates, are compared to how similar rates are tracked in other private institutions that are recognized as having best practices in this area. Other areas of comparison may involve market share, retention rates, research performance and costs. Such benchmarking may be done nationally or internationally.

It may be argued that performance benchmarking is already at work in the UWI quality assurance system, which involves external academics as key members of the review teams. Such professionals bring with them the practices and experiences of their universities, which are shared collegially in the review process. The Department of Geography at UWI Mona benefited from the sharing of subject benchmark statements from the United Kingdom, for example. Similarly, the Biotechnology Centre in a recent review benchmarked faculty load with the University of Puerto Rico. Additional areas for comparison include faculty publication and research funding. The vice chancellor has

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already established an internal standard with regard to yearly publication output. The question is, Where does this stand internationally? Nationally, each UWI campus may already benchmark against peers such as University of Technology in Jamaica or the Southern Caribbean University in Trinidad and Tobago.

Functional benchmarking excludes direct competitors, but compares processes, practices and performance with similar processes of other organizations in the same industry, for example, financial management, library services and enrolment in educational institutions worldwide. "The key driver can be the search for improvement or breakthrough opportunities in business processes" (Consortium for Excellence 2003, 5). Generic or best-in-class benchmarking, on the other hand, compares organizations on a basic practice, process or service (for example, speed of answering telephones, accuracy of payroll, time taken to process orders) or benchmarking student services (such as registry procedures) with private enterprise organizations, for example hotels. The selection of benchmarking type depends on the processes being analysed, the availability of data and the available expertise at the institution. Of course, these different kinds of benchmarking are all interrelated. A commonsense strategy seems to suggest drawing from a mix of all these approaches. At the same time, a composite approach to benchmarking is best done in a spirit of partnership and collaboration. This is so since benchmarking involves a form of continual organizational learning, and organizational learning is best done when it is carried out in a spirit of partnership and collaboration that enables both partners to learn from each other (Consortium for Excellence 2003, 6).

Closely related to the notion of benchmarking is that of best practices. In fact, Rama (2007, 3) defines benchmarking as based on best practice identification. According to her, benchmarking inculcates a spirit of competition and aids comparison and continuous improvement. In the Indian context, out of which Rama writes, the approach to benchmarking goes beyond data scores and performance indicators and focuses on the process by which the desired result can be achieved, that is, best practices. The ability to identify and transform best practices is an important component of the process of benchmarking and this requires some attention.

## Concerns with Benchmarking

Benchmarking relies on empirical data and careful research (OBUS 2003, 18). Higher education institutions already have in place various mechanisms for the collection and analysis of data along with academics and administrators skilled in analysis, such as the UWI Centre for Population Studies. Internal benchmarking cannot stand alone but is the first step on the road towards the final goal of benchmarking: to be "the best in class" (Dahlgaard, Kristensen and Khanji 1998, 219). Competitor benchmarking in the very early stages is an indication that the institution is drawn to the expectations that its students and other key stakeholders may have of it. Furthermore, the results have a high degree of comparability. The disadvantage of this form of benchmarking is that it may be difficult to gather information, and so, indirect sources have to come into play. The advantage, however, is the probability of finding world-class practice grows as the number of potential benchmarking partners is expanded (ibid., 220). Of course, the collection of data for generic benchmarking may be relatively easier than in competitive benchmarking, as it may be easier to get information from institutions and organizations doing different kinds of business than higher education. At the same time, the possibility of transferring the found practice directly to one's institution may be smaller than for the other types of benchmarking.

In generic benchmarking, the institution need not limit itself to comparisons within its area, but may keep its eyes open for best practices everywhere. It is worth noting that the success of one organization is not a rational basis for expecting similar success for another institution simply by adopting their benchmark. Isolating one component from System A and expecting it to work in System B is not necessarily valid (Gitlow et al. 1995, 580). The reasons for success may not be present in System B. Imitation without true understanding of the conditions or causal factors surrounding the imitated system may lead to misapplication and unrealistic expectations. "Benchmarking is not copying. It is learning from another person's or organization's process for the purpose of improving your process" (ibid., 580).

## A Model for UWI

To be effective, benchmarking must be a structured process (Liston 1999, 99). Benchmarking should not be treated as a one-off exercise, but should be incorporated into the regular planning cycle of the institution and the management of key processes. A consistent methodology needs also be adopted and followed by the institution. Processes must be in place to ensure that best practices can be shared across the organization. This will require leadership from the top, which demonstrates a commitment to quality that takes account of the best performers in the peer group and in the world.

Leading benchmarking practitioners have developed multi-step benchmarking procedures to assist higher education institutions in the process of continually questioning their internal operations and relative position in the eye of prospective and current stakeholders (Alstete 1997). The benchmarking process proposed by the European Foundation for Quality Management is described as adopt, adapt and improve. This can be distilled into a five-stage process:

1. Decide what to benchmark
2. Identify benchmarking partners
3. Gather information
4. Analyse
5. Implement for effect

The first step involves selecting and defining the administrative or teaching processes to be studied, identifying how the process will be measured. Once a process is selected for benchmarking, it is important that the appropriate personnel who have a working knowledge of the area should be chosen to conduct the study along with assistance from the Quality Assurance Unit. The second step is a key activity in which decisions are taken about which other higher education institutions to measure against. One of the most difficult areas in the benchmarking process is to identify benchmarking partners. In the case of the UWI, the temptation is to say that our unique regional structure will make it difficult to find a similar institution to benchmark against. Indeed, the UWI does have a unique institutional profile as a regional

university with three campuses and the new open campus. If that is the case, then the University of the South Pacific bears several similarities to the UWI, not the least of which is a greater regional spread. The University of the South Pacific is itself an unusual institution, jointly owned by twelve governments, with campuses on all twelve member islands, and peopled by diverse groups and cultures. The University of the South Pacific therefore makes excellent use of flexible distance education delivery techniques which UWI can well learn from. The University of the South Pacific also shares a similar administrative structure in that the ceremonial head of the university is a chancellor and the senate is the academic authority of the university. Nonetheless, careful attention to the kinds of benchmarking in which UWI may engage makes it clear that the "who" (partner) is dependent on the "what" (process to be benchmarked). In that regard, it is as feasible an activity to partner with a world-class university such as Cambridge (as the Institute for Sustainable Development currently does) as it is to partner with a local university such as the University of Trinidad and Tobago.

Establishing relationships with collegial institutions, through memoranda of understanding, visits, and exchange of information and expertise, is possible for UWI, which already has relationships with numerous such institutions, including the University of the South Pacific, which currently benchmarks itself against Australia and New Zealand and has set itself up as the benchmark for Pacific studies. In a similar vein, UWI should seek to establish itself as the benchmark against which other institutions measure themselves, especially in the region where it leads as the premier research institution. Internationally, it may want to be the benchmark for Caribbean studies or research in tropical diseases. Furthermore, there are already several consortia in existence which are conducting specialized exercises in benchmarking that focus on processes and practices concerning their particular institutional or departmental focus. The AACSB is one of those and the Mona School of Business was recently accepted for membership.

What then is needed is a world-class institution to serve as a benchmarking partner. Once the decision has been taken to benchmark against this particular partner, a further process of identifying the best practice which has led to the world-class performance follows. This information is collected using pri-

mary and/or secondary research about the partner being studied. Much analysis will then be required to decide how to adopt and adapt this best practice in order to meet the benchmark. One area of best practice in post-secondary education identified by Liston is whether teachers have formal qualifications in education. Many have a doctorate in their professional area and are highly valued for the knowledge and expertise in the domains in which they teach. There is a move afoot to require those who are employed to teach in higher education to possess some formal teaching qualification. UWI is no exception as it moves towards instituting certification for teachers, but in doing so it can learn from others.

## By Way of a Conclusion

For benchmarking to be successful, it is clear that will involve commitments to partnership and transformation. It is important to have a sense of what is already being done in terms of benchmarking across the three campuses, so some kind of initial study will be necessary before benchmarking can be established as a strategic goal for UWI. Once this is done, the move towards benchmarking as a strategic goal must be framed as an integral part of the quality assurance and enhancement process which aims to ensure, maintain and improve the quality of the university's provisions. As with other processes of change management, it is important to have the commitment of all stakeholders. It may also be useful to produce a UWI guide to benchmarks and benchmarking to provide information about international standards and higher education systems against which UWI will be making appropriate comparisons and so help staff to identify benchmarks and implement benchmarking.

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# Is There a Role for Benchmarking in Teaching and Learning Centres?

MERVIN E. CHISHOLM

The urgent calls since the 1980s for the improvement of undergraduate education (Boyer 1987; Astin 1993; Dearing Report 1997; Wingspread Group 1993) have inspired the global re-engineering of higher education and have brought to the foreground the issue of quality assurance. In many countries, searching questions have been asked about higher education, particularly about the quality of the teaching and learning in colleges and universities. Against this background, quality assurance has emerged as a major conversation in the higher education landscape. The re-engineering of higher education has been ably assisted with the research on learning, which has been remarkably productive during the last three decades.

Since quality assurance has assumed a place of increased prominence in higher education, educational outcomes and institutional effectiveness are becoming prominent markers of quality. There are clear signs that quality assurance in the twenty-first century will focus more on institutional capacity, educational and organizational effectiveness, and demonstrated results in the form of better learning and improved skills and competencies required by the society. In this regard, benchmarking is an increasingly important approach to quality assurance, enabling universities to demonstrate their quality against external standards. Clearly, there can be a role for benchmarking in the domain of teaching and learning that is focused on both outputs and processes, particularly learning inputs.

Many teaching and learning centres in higher education have emerged to provide the kind of professional development for faculty that will empower them with the skills and competencies needed to become more learner-centred, employing the active and interactive pedagogies that lead to improved learning. However, there is little empirical evidence to suggest that teaching and learning centres have fostered an overall improvement in university teaching. It is difficult to gauge the impact of teaching and learning centres on the overall culture of teaching, since these centres are largely concerned with the individual lecturer/teacher. Accordingly, the focus of this article is an investigation of some of the issues relevant to the use of benchmarking as a management tool for providing greater levels of accountability, improvement and change in teaching and learning centres.

## Benchmarking in Higher Education

Benchmarking is a practice drawn from the corporate world, in which organizations identify similar organizations against which to compare their practices and achievements. It is a process of measurement using an external standard of quality to measure internal and external tasks, and it can also be viewed as a framework for a process of continuous improvement. In the first place, it involves examining and understanding internal procedures, then searching for best practices in other organizations that match those identified internally, and finally, adapting those practices within the organization to improve performance.

Once best practices are identified, programmes that consistently perform exceptionally well can be determined and, through further investigation of the top-performing programmes, the common elements associated with superior performance can be identified and shared. Best-practice benchmarking is the pursuit by organizations of enhanced performance by learning from the successful practices of others. In this regard, best-practice benchmarking implicitly stresses the essential aspect of comparison with exemplars. Benchmarking is therefore more than comparison; it is multi-dimensional and multi-vocal and can consciously or unconsciously engender improvement and change.

A review of the literature on benchmarking in higher education points to the fact that it has been used extensively in some systems. From the work of Schofield (1998a, 1998b) and Fry et al. (2000), as cited in Holloway and Francis (2002), the impression is given that some of the benchmarking that has found its way into academia has been concerned with institutional management. However, much of the benchmarking has not had any significant impact on professional practice or been linked in compelling ways to learning outcomes. It was observed that in some disciplines that are closely aligned to vocational education, where training approaches receive pre-eminent attention, especially those associated with admission to a profession, there has been more overt action to align objectives of the training to learning outcomes for the purposes of greater levels of accountability.

The focus on outputs of education programmes has featured prominently in the overall evaluation of teaching and learning. Yet the processes involved are also important and need to be factored into the overall evaluative framework if accountability, improvement and change are to take root in quality assurance. Benchmarking in higher education therefore has its work cut out for it, and can be used in teaching and learning centres to look at the processes involved in teaching and learning and not merely the exit outcomes.

In much of the literature reviewed, the general distinguishable common thread was the focus on the usage of benchmarking, largely on metrics, outputs and performance indicators. There was very little focus on processes; in fact, even where some emphasis was placed on processes, administrative processes received the most attention and academic processes (for instance, teaching and learning incorporating teaching and learning centres) were marginalized or left unattended.

Cox and Thompson (1998) summarize the literature on benchmarking, underscoring the fact that it subsumes a range of activities and purpose and effectiveness vary between organizations. The literature is replete with typologies of benchmarking. Perhaps the best-known typology is that of Camp (1995), which provides an understanding of different forms of benchmarking: the internal, functional, competitive and generic. It is useful at this stage to note the distinction between "results benchmarking" and "process benchmarking". Results benchmarking generates data on the institutions or organ-

izations compared; process benchmarking is concerned with how the results were arrived at, ensuring that performance gaps in the results can be investigated. Another useful approach is that of Schofield (1998a, 1998b), which distinguishes between implicit and explicit benchmarking. In implicit benchmarking there is emphasis on information-gathering exercises, such as surveys, and in explicit benchmarking, emphasis is placed on the processes deliberately designed to facilitate comparisons and identify directions for improvement and, ultimately, change. This is important for the best practices in an organization to be investigated so that strong performers and exemplary practice will be brought to the foreground.

Using this typology, it appears that explicit benchmarking that is aligned to process benchmarking might be well placed for investigating teaching and learning and teaching and learning centres. It is important to look at the overall learning inputs and, hence, some conceptual framework for quality assurance would be helpful for teaching and learning centres in higher education.

Gonzalez and Ayarza (1998), as cited in Leo-Rhynie (2000), developed a model for examining institutions of higher education for improved quality. For these writers, quality is understood to be best demonstrated when there is a comprehensive evaluation for quality in the multiple layers and departments of the institution as well as the institution's commitment to its overall vision and mission. They suggest that the dimensions of quality incorporate relevance, effectiveness, resources, efficiency, efficacy and processes in each of the following areas: general academic aspects, teaching function, research and knowledge creation, outreach and services, and administrative management. Accordingly, the quality standards that institutions of higher education must subscribe to are as follows:

1. Academic programmes that meet students' needs and satisfy stakeholders' concerns
2. A teaching and learning environment of the highest quality
3. Rigorous, relevant research, of high practical value
4. Outreach and services that are linked to community needs and permit the institution to earn from the skills of faculty members and students.
5. Administrative academic management that is efficient and effective and provides a satisfactory return on investment

Unfortunately, much of this proposal hinges on some of the overriding and divisive issues in higher education, in particular, commercialization. The framing of the model in this way suggests that higher education has been captivated (if not captured) by market models of understanding and operations. Consequently, there is much effort expended to demonstrate that higher education should be market oriented (for instance meeting students' needs) and research should be of practical value, but there is little reference to the public service orientation of the academic community. However, this model does sensitize the higher education community to some of the commanding issues in quality assurance, and benchmarking can be used in evaluations that seek greater levels of accountability, improvement and change in higher education.

## Benchmarking: Accountability, Improvement and Change

The pressures on higher education to respond to the demands for more tangible evidence about the performance of colleges and universities appear every bit as strong as the demands for more access to quality programmes and the challenges posed by increasingly constrained resources. Ewell (1990, 1999) argues that a "new accountability" or a "culture of accountability" has enveloped higher education globally. Embracing benchmarking as a management tool calls for the institution of higher education to set realistic goals and to tap the competitive spirit of faculty and staff to perform as well as their peers in the compared organization.

Within the sphere of teaching and learning centres, benchmarking must also be seen as a method of accountability. Where the university has a mission of improved teaching and learning or more learner-centred approaches, exit outcomes are often used in making evaluatory statements about teaching and learning. Benchmarking that focuses on processes can be one of those management tools that provides some measure of accountability in higher education and responds to the searching questions of the many stakeholders in higher education for improved performance of the sector.

Quality assurance has been institutionalized and operationalized as part of the "new accountability" thrust in higher education with rigorous require-

ments, accreditation and other techniques, such as the review processes, that require institutions to collect, format, report and use information to improve the quality of their programmes and services. Benchmarking has essentially been co-opted and added to the mix of approaches that provide a means for institutions to evaluate and improve their practices and accomplishments. Benchmarking relationships with national and international universities are often sought among institutions that feel they can learn from one another. As a management tool, benchmarking has the potential to be a multi-vocal indicator in the quality assurance arsenal. External comparisons can be used to strengthen claims for verifiable standards of quality and, of course, to improve systems and processes in an institution.

## Adaptive and Generative Learning

Benchmarking can be one of the processes used to move the teaching and learning mission within higher education upward and onward. In situations where benchmarking is undertaken and exemplary practice becomes the measure, an institution that seeks improvement can rise to the challenge of transformation. Universities should not only "foster learning in their students but also foster learning within their organization so they can grow in quality, stature, and value" (Stralser 1995, 19). From this perspective, benchmarking can be conceptualized as a systematic way of learning from others in order to improve and change. However, the impulse to learn is only the first stage of the process: this impulse then prompts and pushes one to be generative.

In total quality management, the evolution from adaptive to generative learning has been amply demonstrated in the responsiveness to the needs of clients and customers in businesses, adapting practices to offer better services. In seeking to be responsive to their clients, the business enterprise has to learn about clients' needs, the trends and the ways they might satisfy their customers. Research is an indispensable tool in this process. So, too, in higher education there is need for adapting to clients and engaging in generative learning, understanding and meeting the legitimate needs of learners. Generative learning requires new ways at looking at the world; it calls for

creativity, innovation and responsiveness. In this regard, seeing the systems that control events and grasping the source of the problems are important, but making meaningful responses is central to the process. The research on learning over the last three decades is well positioned to provide useful information that can be utilized in the quest for generative learning in teaching and learning centres even as benchmarking is engaged with the view of developing greater levels of accountability, improving practices and changing processes.

## A Research and Policy Tool for Comparing

The philosophy underlying benchmarking is that learning from "best practice cases" or "best practice principles" is an effective way to improve the specific practices of any one organization (Alstete 1995). As a research and policy tool, benchmarking, particularly in the domain of teaching and learning, can be used to promote quality improvements by comparing institutional performance to a set of articulated practices or pedagogies. By looking at best practices in teaching and learning centres in other colleges or universities, and by adopting some of the successful and exemplary operational practices, teaching and learning centres can be provided with information and examples of practices that can be transferred, synthesized, transformed and utilized to engage the processes of adaptive and generative learning. The benefits from the deliberations about the new insights and the implementation of practices that will serve the interest of teaching and learning centres for the better is one way through which these centres can evolve, continually learning and responding to needs.

Benchmarking is an ongoing process and a method of institutional learning: several players in the institution can engage in the comparative institutional/departmental analysis and help to develop plans for improvements. Further, benchmarking can be a method of stimulating planned change in teaching and learning as well as in other areas of operation. It can help an organization to and mature, refocus, reposition and serve its constituency well. The ultimate goal of benchmarking is improvement over time.

Although in higher education, we normally look to similar organizations as

our own for practices to borrow, successful benchmarking might in fact mean looking outside one's own field as well. With the rapid changes in technology, it would be worthwhile to look at how major corporations are training and re-educating their employees and to see if there are any ideas and/or processes that could be borrowed and altered to suit other contexts.

According to Achtemeier and Simpson (2005), benchmarking within teaching and learning centres in higher education cannot be pursued without an appreciation of institutional cultural differences. This calls for dialogue regarding appropriate adaptations. Business-oriented external demands for accountability and efficiency might create a tension in higher education. A meaningful balancing act must be pursued, and demands for accountability cannot be discarded but they must stand alongside internal concerns for improvement and effectiveness.

If benchmarking is not comprehensive and inclusive there will be greater difficulties in selling the results to management and staff for action. This will require influence, negotiation and persuasion. Benchmarking might also be seen as a technical tool, but it is more useful when framed as a management tool, so the research undertaken about best practices is received by the team leaders who have the requisite power and authority to use the results to facilitate improvements and policy change as necessary.

## Benchmarking to Deal with Institutional Culture and Change

In the quest to improve teaching and learning, institutional culture can be problematic. Benchmarking should not be dismissed, since, when it is comprehensive and inclusive, over time it can chip away at the resistance to change. In many cases, there are multiple understandings of teaching, and sys-

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tems theories point to improvement in teaching and learning as a systemic problem (Dirkx and Conner 2005). In this regard, systemic change might be required. This reference to systemic change calls attention to institutionally shared expectations. In this era, when there are many teaching and learning centres, there has been greater interest in learner- and learning-centred approaches to teaching. In order for institutions to truly embrace a learner-centred paradigm, systemic change might be required. If the institution has multiple cultures, this will invariably call for the adoption by the administration, faculty and support staff of a shared set of beliefs and assumptions about teaching and learning that will transform the institution into a truly learner-centred one.

At the University of the West Indies (UWI) at Mona there is a vision of a more learner-centred institution. Hancock and Tyler (2001) describe two broad approaches on culture and organizations: corporate and organizational or institutional. Corporate culture reflects a "set of cultural values, norms, and their symbolic manifestations, devised by management and transmitted both formally and informally to the rest of the workforce"; organizational or institutional culture, on the other hand, is a reference "to the more organic nature of organizational life, one that grows or emerges from the lived experiences of organizations" (100), and reflects organizational members as culture makers and cultural workers.

The vision of the UWI Mona as a more learner-centred institution suggests a sense of the corporate culture at work and the goal of fostering systemic change in teaching and learning through some kind of cultural management. A teaching and learning centre can be a part of this cultural management agenda. Yet there is need for connection to the organizational culture. Conversations about systemic change with reference to this institution imply that a cultural perspective of the institution as an organization is embraced. It is organizational/institutional culture that will most likely drive systemic change. Cultural change in any institution is problematic, however, since there is no unitary or unified voice around teaching and learning. There are usually different beliefs, values and behaviours among faculty that reflect the multiplicity of ways in which teaching and learning are framed. Oftentimes there are differing and even contradictory voices regarding the improvement

of teaching and learning. Benchmarking that is inclusive and comprehensive can be one cog in the wheel of systemic change and the realization of the vision of a truly student/learner-centred institution of excellence.

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# Teaching/Learning Benchmarking in Higher Education

ANNA-MAY EDWARDS-HENRY

## Introduction

When our procedures for validation and approval of programmes involve external advisers so that the curriculum under consideration can be judged against expectations held by other institutions, we are engaging in benchmarking. Using external examiners to test whether the standards achieved by our students are consonant with those from other institutions is another form of benchmarking, and in this regard higher education institutions have been engaging in benchmarking for some time, often without realizing it (Yorke 2000). In today's higher education environment, however, benchmarking is a rigorous, systematic and perhaps formulaic practice that serves specific educational purposes and institutional needs.

Benchmarking is about quality and standards and the means of indicating these criteria. Camp (1989, 5) describes the process as "the search for those best practices that lead to the superior performance". The emphasis in benchmarking is on the study of practices and processes of recognized leading institutions to find out how they do what they do, and not the mere collection of data (PSU 2006). Thus, benchmarking provides an opportunity for an institution to take steps to ensure high quality through collaboration and discussion with leaders in the field. The benchmarking process is designed to lead to the adoption and adaptation of best practices.

This conception of benchmarking fits within the mould of self-evaluation and self-regulation through voluntary scrutiny of the institution's internal and external environments, which is consistent with the autonomy and responsibility cherished by higher education institutions. However, this process was initially driven by the demands of oversight and funding agencies in the United Kingdom that required greater accountability of higher education institutions in the 1980s. Since then, there have been many developments around the concepts of accountability and responsibility for the quality of higher education, including the assumption by institutions that they are responsible for ensuring their own quality. Some higher education institutions, for example the University of Sydney, have explored benchmarking as part of their quality assurance and quality enhancement frameworks. However, there is a clear distinction between quality assurance, which has a focus on what has happened, and quality enhancement, in which what is happening and what could happen are the defining forces (Henderson-Smart et al. 2006). The latter is a growing trend. Many universities in the United Kingdom, Australia and North America seem to be moving towards quality enhancement, which compels an institution to determine what quality is, and ultimately hold responsibility for the quality of what it does (Henderson-Smart et al. 2006). Benchmarking has fast become a defining process in determining the quality of higher education institutions, their offerings and modus operandi.

Within the context of development at the University of the West Indies (UWI), the commitment to quality arises from our intrinsic desire to meet

- prevailing expectations as the leading tertiary level institution in the English-speaking Caribbean;
- increased competition in a shrinking global market; and
- the standards required by accreditation bodies that engage in rigorous scrutiny of institutional processes and outcomes.

That the issue of quality is critical to the UWI is recognized in the current strategic plan, which states that "quality assurance is the formal mechanism for managing educational standards and quality. The UWI has in place an integrated quality assurance system upheld by University regulations" (UWI 2007, 17). This is also consistent with the systematic implementation of qual-

ity assurance reviews of departments throughout the university system, and to some extent the accreditation exercises undertaken by professional departments. However, the university also recognizes that decisions about quality are not singularly determined by global and or regional standards, but also by internal perspectives, constructs and practices. The strategic plan addresses quality enhancement issues, for example, in strategies to "create a system of teaching appraisal through accepted best practices" indicated by "teaching appraisal outcomes (including student evaluation of teaching)" (UWI 2007, 69). Thus, like other higher education institutions worldwide, we are concentrating our efforts on quality enhancement. The practice of benchmarking is therefore essential to the quality of education at the UWI in order to guarantee the efficacy of our quality assurance framework and, increasingly, for quality enhancement.

## Engaging the Teaching/Learning Benchmarking Process

A number of characteristics inform the benchmarking process – for example, improvement – and in such a case, the activities within the process are designed to illuminate current practices towards the achievement of that goal. The benchmarking process usually involves a survey of the target institutions and/or departments that are used for comparison. Obvious in the process is that the same survey instruments are used for data collection from the targets. The strength of the process is in the quality of the survey instruments and data-collection techniques. A critical step in benchmarking is also self-evaluation, which forms the basis for both discourse and comparison. In addition, developing the relevant benchmarking criteria is grounded in theory and research.

The example of benchmarking teaching practices in compulsory courses in three engineering programmes in Swedish universities – mechanical engineering, Chalmers; applied physics and electrical engineering, Linkoping Institute of Technology (LiTH), Sweden; and vehicle engineering, KTH Royal Institute of Technology, Sweden – illustrate how the process might unfold (Edstrom, Andersson and Engstrom 2001). Using a common instrument, each participating institution conducted its own survey and prepared individ-

ual reports along the themes of the instrument. The survey instrument was derived from the underpinning theories about objectives (Bloom 1956; Gronlund 2000), assessment (Biggs 2003; Gibbs 1992; Brown and Knight 1994), teaching and evaluation (Ramsden 1992). Guiding the interview process was a simple questionnaire on nine concepts in which the questions were grounded: aim/objectives; pedagogical approach; teaching techniques; use of technology; diagnostics; motivation; interaction; assessment; and course evaluation. The questions asked were as follows:

- Is there an explicit pedagogical approach?
- What are the teaching techniques in use?
- How is previous knowledge of content determined?
- How do you motivate students?
- What is the purpose of evaluation?
- What are the main evaluation questions?

Once the instruments and processes were decided, each institution undertook its own research following the agreed guidelines. The interviewers compiled their data and prepared separate reports, and they then collectively prepared a joint report from scrutiny of the three self-reports. In the joint report, the team was careful to highlight examples of best practices illustrated among the three institutions. Evident in the outcome of the exercise was that several best practices were apparent in one of the institutions, so there was opportunity for guided changes to improve practices in the others.

Examination of the September 2004 benchmarking exercise between the University of Sydney and Monash University (the Teaching-Research Benchmarking Project) also illustrates several stages that comprise the benchmarking process. These Australian universities identified the stages in the benchmarking process in their own reporting of the process as follows:

- Establishing the partnership
- Setting the framework (areas of comparison and matrix)
- Securing a memorandum of understanding between the two institutions
- Applying the framework
- Benchmarking, self-evaluating
- Generating recommendations (Monash University Report, 2004)

Comparisons between the University of Sydney and Monash University were made based on the utilization of the agreed matrix to self-assess, and a collaborative approach to making recommendations for the identification good practices where they existed and the establishment of those practices where they fell below par. In benchmarking the teaching-research nexus, key areas at both the institutional and faculty levels were considered critical to facilitating the process and both dimensions were addressed. Eleven areas were compared at the institutional level, ranging from "policy" and "strategic planning" to "performance management recruitment", "probation and promotion", "organisational and staff development" to "graduate attributes" and "courses". Faculty-level dimensions relative to the teaching-research nexus included "bringing the teacher's research into the classroom", "research, curriculum development and internationalisation"; "building students' research and inquiry capability" to "researching teaching" and "teaching leading research". These areas speak to the strategic and comprehensive nature of the benchmarking process, also observed in the benchmarking process of the Swedish universities discussed above.

The benchmarking process as currently practised unfolds as deeply involved and rigorous, usually defined as a project that is undertaken to ultimately highlight best practices. There are several imperatives to the process, including the identification of key areas of comparison that, as agreed by the participants, matter. There is also grounding of selected criteria in prevailing educational theory and the process itself revolves around self-assessment.

Benchmarking as a process involves

- Setting of agreed criteria and targets
- Grounding in theory
- Self-assessment
- Individual reporting
- Collaborative evaluation
- Identification of best practices

This process takes place within a framework of understanding that identifies the roles and responsibilities of the various parties.

## Selecting Benchmarking Partners

One of the challenges to engaging the benchmarking process generally, and no doubt in benchmarking teaching and learning, is the selection of benchmarking partners. The trend in selecting benchmarking partners seems to relate to one or all of these characteristics: (1) the purpose of the benchmarking exercise, (2) the reputation of the participating institutions relevant to the purpose, and (3) the willingness of the participating institutions to commit to the benchmarking process and the inevitable deep scrutiny. For example, Thames Valley University, United Kingdom, used benchmarking to provide evidence for restructuring its undergraduate curriculum and creating a more flexible learning environment. The university conducted a survey in which they systematically examined and learned from the modular policies, practices and experiences of eleven other universities and colleges of higher education (Morgan 2000). The criteria for selection were as follows: similar or contrasting structures; long-term operation; range of subjects; progression structures and requirements; and academic, administrative, IT and curricular support structures. These criteria are related to the purpose of the benchmarking process.

## Benchmarking Teaching/Learning at the UWI

If benchmarking is about the search for best practices, where would the search lead us as an institution if we were to benchmark teaching/learning, and how would or should we engage the process? What practices would we use in benchmarking teaching and learning? According to Henderson-Smart et al. (2006), benchmarking teaching and learning should address the need for the teaching and learning process to be based on a common purpose and philosophy, designed to achieve good practice and to ensure continuous improvement. In the context of the UWI, this would require a prepared and skilled collegiate that is familiar with current trends in teaching and learning, including up-to-date knowledge of teaching practices and the ability to motivate students, present disciplinary knowledge in a variety of forms and generally engage in what Eraut (1991) and Schon (1970) refer to as reflective practice.

To effectively benchmark teaching and learning, comparisons in five essential areas are critical:

1. Teacher qualifications
2. Use of teaching methodologies
3. Teaching support
4. Student experience
5. Assessment for development

These five areas of benchmarking are fundamental to teaching and learning effectiveness. *Teacher qualification* includes not merely qualification in a discipline, but also teaching certification, since it is now fully appreciated that knowing a discipline is not sufficient to teach that discipline; and while teaching does have an artistic quality, it is as much a science in which concepts, principles, tenets and ideas are systematically applied to practice (Schon 1979; Eraut 1991). Teachers must have knowledge of the components of the teaching/learning discipline to inform practice if that practice is to be more than ad hoc, to be better able to achieve the required learning outcomes.

Related to teaching qualification is the purposive *use of teaching methodologies* that cater to the increasing and increasingly diverse students who populate the UWI. There is no longer the belief that one size fits all and that the only form of teaching is the lecture. Teachers must be skilled practitioners who are able to change their teaching strategies to meet the demands of evolving curricula and continually changing student populations. This comes with both the knowledge of teaching methodologies and the ability to utilize these methodologies appropriately to achieve the desired learning outcomes.

With the recognition that teachers, like other professionals, must continually reflect on their practice and hone their skills (Eraut 1994), institutions must facilitate and support the requisite development of teachers. Instructional development units, professional development offices, and staff and educational development departments are now an integral part of the higher education landscape and attest to the importance of *teaching support* in respect of quality teaching and learning.

Since Barr and Tagg's (1995) seminal work that engendered a paradigmatic shift from instruction to learning, higher education institutions have placed

emphasis on creating learning environments in which increasingly diverse learner populations are likely to reach their desired potentials. The *student experience* reflects the quality of the input and its impact on learning, and must therefore be included in benchmarking teaching and learning quality.

The fifth area for benchmarking teaching and learning is *assessment for development*. This is often a forgotten purpose of assessment (Astin 1991b) as there is greater emphasis on summative examinations and the need for students to pass tests. Yet the use of assessment for development moves the focus of responsibility for learning to the learners and imbues them with tools to take responsibility for self-assessment and their own learning, which is often cited as a desirable attribute by teachers and higher education institutions. The UWI strategic plan includes "a lifelong, self-motivated learner" (UWI 2007, 69) among the attributes of the distinctive graduate. Through feedback mechanisms involving self, other students and lecturers – the formative or developmental aspect of assessment – the learners derive the most benefits for realizing their potential (Astin 1991a).

Teacher qualifications, use of teaching methodologies and teaching support can be viewed as inputs, while the other two, student experience and assessment for development, may be regarded as the process benchmarks of a teaching and learning system whose student output is marked by the highest quality.

A review of the action items under the teaching and learning strategies recommended in the UWI "Draft Strategic Plan, 2007–2012" illustrates that these areas are significant. They form the focal point for action and, as a result, justify their selection for benchmarking. For example, among other recommendations it is stated that teaching quality is to be enhanced through the provision of "training opportunities for lecturers", with relevant performance indicators including "the level of participation of new and existing staff in training programmes", "the percentage of staff trained and certified in teaching for higher education", and "increased use of teaching/learning methodologies" (UWI 2007, 69). The plan also recommends enhancing "learning effectiveness by providing students with more diverse and flexible learning experiences" through such mechanisms as placing "students at the centre of the teaching/learning experience"; using "teaching/learning strategies that are

participatory"; rewarding both processes and products by students; and using a "wider and more appropriate range of assessment strategies" (ibid., 70).

The 2007–12 strategic plan is clear about the mechanisms and methods that must engage the attention and practice of teaching and learning to prepare the distinctive UWI graduate. These mechanisms are branded by quality. Benchmarking in this scenario allows us to match our institutional practices to those of other leading institutions, and the process clarifies how we feature in the broader context. Benchmarking is necessary for both the positioning of the UWI among leaders in the field and validating our graduates as world-class citizens. Elements of both quality assurance and enhancement are obvious in the desired outcomes.

## Some Challenges to Benchmarking Teaching/Learning at the UWI

Several issues should be considered if the UWI is to artfully and effectively incorporate benchmarking into its quality enhancement framework. These include the following:

1. Collaboration and the underpinning concepts of trust and professionalism
2. Commitment to the process
3. Institutional philosophy and culture
4. Acceptance of criticism and unexpected outcomes
5. Rigour
6. Follow-up
7. Authority and ownership

*Collaboration and the underpinning concepts of trust and professionalism:* Benchmarking principles and practices are founded on professionalism and collaboration. These attributes centre around our value systems and the expectation that the highest standards of behaviour prevail. Thus, autonomy, self-regulation, respect for self and others, confidence in the process, openness and sharing would be the norm, and agendas would be tabled and clear. Benchmarking assumes concepts of trust – trust that each institution provides accurate data and self-assessments – and arriving at consensus on best

practices is based on the evidence provided. Agreements about benchmarking must be founded on common professional principles and concepts of collaboration if the process is to be successful.

*Commitment to the process:* Following on from agreement about professional and collaborative concepts is the question of commitment to the process. Inevitably, the benchmarking process is long and time consuming. (The University of Sydney/University of Monash's Teaching-Research Nexus was a four-year project involving many staff members and external funding; benchmarking of the engineering departments of the three Swedish universities took place over one academic year.) Project leaders and drivers must be committed to the process and the demands on time and resources that are required in achieving meaningful benchmarking.

*Institutional philosophy and culture:* A challenge to engaging in benchmarking of any kind is the climate and culture of the institution. Irrespective of agreements between and among institutions, the prevailing philosophy and culture of a participating institution can impede the benchmarking process. For example, if the sharing of information and collaboration are not part of the culture of a particular department, then there will be great difficulty in that department suddenly becoming a part of a collaborative exercise. Or, if the personal philosophies of staff involved are parochial, then an exercise for institutional good will not be viewed as important or necessary even though gain for all is the ultimate goal.

*Acceptance of criticism and unexpected outcomes:* Linked to the philosophy and culture of the institution is the practice of critical analysis (giving and receiving criticism). Participants must be prepared to critically assess themselves and others, including delivering critiques in acceptable formats. In the UWI context, where inherent differences exist on each campus, particular care must be exercised in addressing the issue of criticism. The strength of benchmarking is that because criticism is based on self-assessment, there is an opportunity to stave off external criticism if the self-assessment is thorough and accurate. There must also be the supporting self-restraint in claiming best practices. Arriving at consensus on best practices must be collaborative and evidence-based.

*Rigour:* Benchmarking is not merely the collection of data by way of check-

lists and rating scales. It involves data collection from diverse sources using a variety of techniques, including interviews and other qualitative strategies. There are the concomitant data analysis, triangulation and interpretation techniques to be applied. The more rigorous the process, the better the data to make the relevant determinations and recommendations. Hence, there must be commitment to the conduct of the benchmarking process, as well as to overall benchmarking as a strategy for quality enhancement.

*Follow-up:* The benchmarking process, especially with a quality enhancement focus, inevitably points the way to improvement. A necessary step is following on recommendations and ensuring that the suggested changes are brought into effect to maximize the value of the project. This calls for structures, including organizational and resource allocations, and commitment to deliberate plans of action. If this follow-up is not seen as part of the benchmarking process itself, then the project could become expensive, futile and ineffective.

*Authority and ownership:* The role of the initiating institution, the process of partnering and collaborating, and funding and reporting must be resolved before benchmarking can become a reality. In the benchmarking exercise between the University of Sydney and Monash University, a memorandum of understanding outlined the agreed roles and responsibilities, and this attests to the formality and legality of benchmarking.

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Given the unique structure of the UWI, with multiple campuses in distinctive Caribbean islands, each of which bears its own culture and characteristics, we do not have to look far to commence our teaching and learning benchmarking process. There is good opportunity to first engage in internal benchmarking and develop some mastery of the benchmarking process; since the campuses operate as entities, there is, at the same time, the issue of how these differences impact on the intentions of the university. With the search on for best practices in the five areas identified as essential to teaching and learning effectiveness, benchmarking teaching and learning becomes the first step in assuring that the graduates from each campus develop the attributes of the distinctive UWI graduate as described in the university's strategic plan for 2007–12.

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# Establishing a UWI Caribbean Foundation

## Benchmarking and the "Caribbean Civilization" Course

JOHN F. CAMPBELL

## Introduction

The process of benchmarking is hardly discussed at most academic planning sessions concerned with planning for the way forward. To this end, therefore, planners are often too caught up with the highly visible action of "getting things done". This emphasis is not to be considered lightly, as stakeholders are anxious for evidence of action and progress. However, there will always remain the nagging doubt in the minds of the planners about whether or not they are doing the right thing. Ironically, their fears could be alleviated if more focus was placed on the practice of benchmarking.

Benchmarking (the process of comparing an organization's systems to other similar ones with the aim of bettering the organization's own system) calls for a thorough knowledge of the home system and the subroutines that underpin it. It then calls for a comparable knowledge of similar systems and an understanding of the things that are being better achieved there and the reasons why. It must not be forgotten, however, that in the comparison, one may realize that some things may be done better within the organization's home system.

So benchmarking calls for the striving towards best course practice (internal and external) and adapting it to a local context or expanding it as necessary. One realizes automatically that this approach calls for action based on reality. Benchmarking offers a relatively quick and easy way to test and cri-

tique new ideas and innovations even before they have been implemented. It achieves this end as it allows the planners the opportunities to "see" their suggestions already in use in other organizations and to gauge the possible effectiveness of these strategies in their own organization.

## The Problem of "Caribbean Civilization"

The University of the West Indies (UWI) foundation course "Caribbean Civilization" has been taught for a number of years at the UWI campus at St Augustine. Originally a year-long course, it was delivered under the title "Development of Civilization" until 1996 when the course was semesterized and a new focus given to it that warranted the title change. Until January 2004 this new course was team taught from the Department of History with a number of lecturers being called in to give specialist guest lectures. During this period, one lecturer was appointed to oversee the course and co-ordinate the various lecture segments. This lecturer had also to give general guidance to students whenever they needed it on any aspect of the course. Because it was a foundation course, there was always a large yearly enrolment and this increased with semesterization as the university's intake also grew.

Students of the course complained often of being "lost" within the large enrolment and they complained also of not knowing the relevance of the course content to their university careers. Additionally, students complained about a lack of interest in them displayed by the individual lecturers, who mechanically came in and delivered their lecture "piece" and had nothing further to do with the course. Students further complained that the course lacked coherency and applicability itself and so was really just an imposition. There was no enjoyment or enthusiasm for the course displayed by the students. Besides, it was realized that with some "cramming" the night before an exam, a student could almost certainly memorize enough to just get by and get through this "hurdle".

In January 2004 the faculty dean of the hosting faculty (Humanities and Education) at the UWI, St Augustine, decided that the ongoing student clamour against the course needed to be addressed. To this end, he decided that the

course needed revitalization and serious restructuring based on desirable benchmarking standards.

## Course Restructuring

The overall aim of restructuring was to improve student appreciation of the course through the adoption of benchmarking methodologies that would lead to the adoption of best course practices, which would highlight student centredness, online technologies and economies of scale.

The first step in the restructuring process was to set up a benchmarking procedure that would facilitate change. The areas earmarked for benchmarking were as follows:

1. Teaching content
2. Teaching methodology
3. Student venues
4. Student enjoyment
5. Past paper/exam preparation
6. Feedback

### Strategy Implementation

In the UWI case, the processes of internal, metric and strategic benchmarking were used. (The definitions of the processes are as outlined in Coers, Gardner et al. 2001, 3.) In the stage of metric benchmarking, data was gathered to realize the state of the course and the ways in which it could be improved. Immediately following on from this stage, process and internal benchmarking activities were done to realize best course practice across the UWI's three campuses and at international universities.

To complete the comparisons, the course leader compiled statistics of course enrolment numbers, failure rates, pass rates and rates of exam excellence. The lecturer also analysed the number of teaching factors inputted into the system and the output/result of that input. UWI students' satisfaction was also a critical factor in the computational process. While this satisfaction can-

not be measured in discrete numbers, a general sense of student (dis)satisfaction was obtained from the formal and informal feedback to the course.

From the outset, it was decided that an influential change facilitator well located within the UWI was required in order to accomplish the insights of benchmarking. The encouragement for change was not departmentally driven, and as a result the change facilitators were not within the Department of History but came, ultimately, from the office of the faculty dean.

First, the teaching content was examined and it was found that much of it was no longer relevant to the changing needs of the students. As such, the students had, understandably, not been able to link the content with their current academic endeavours. The course content was also found to be skewed in terms of a departmental rather than a faculty offering. This point was addressed by totally redrafting the syllabus, which was implemented in September 2004 with new reading lists. This was augmented a year later with a complete set of relevant copyrighted readings that focused on the new faculty-oriented core units of the course.

The students now had one source for core information, which eliminated the problems of outdated readings, unavailable readings, and the inconvenience of library queues and waiting lists for reading material. Second, the assessment of the course was changed from a single exam utilizing only the essay mode of assessment to a three-part assessment that tested different skills such as report production and critical-thinking skills. The final exam was reduced from an exam worth 100 per cent of marks to one worth 60 per cent, with coursework components now accounting for 40 per cent of all marks.

The lecturing style was completely changed. To respond to the students' cry for coherency and a sense of personal inclusion within the large classes, one lecturer undertook all the lectures for the course. This change followed on from advisable best course practice for solving this problem. Increased office hours were also given, with four hours being officially allotted each week and an open-door policy being encouraged throughout the week, a policy that was reinforced with the offer of free cookies and bottled water to all students. This proved very successful and students continue to flock for consultations where they felt relaxed enough to discuss the areas of the course that were working

and those areas that needed further improvement. This feedback proved invaluable and was well worth the cookies utilized for the information.

The introduction of a virtual tutor in January 2005 allowed students to communicate with the lecturer twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, with the surety of feedback on all their emails. The students also had the use of an online website (WebCT, which was later replaced by My Elearning) for the course, where they would now submit coursework and receive assignments without the inconvenience of a face-to-face office submission on a deadline date. The online website meant also that students could now submit their assignments from anywhere in the world with Internet access. Additionally, benchmarking insights were imported from other universities where technology was used to enliven lecture presentations. These insights moved beyond PowerPoint presentations to include the production of multimedia CDs with self-paced learning exercises based on the teaching modules. Students were also provided with full audio versions of the course lectures.

Student venues were also rationalized and a permanent venue was secured, with state-of-the-art teaching aids and a comfortable amphitheatre seating arrangement conducive to interactive lecture sessions. Numerous book prizes during normal class time were introduced to encourage student initiatives and questions, and this was undertaken with a supply of books being secured from a corporate sponsor.

Students were also given the exclusive use of a private library set up under the auspices of the course lecturer and the faculty dean. Exam preparation and course transparency was increased with the provision of past papers in the course and worked solutions for past papers. Additionally, students of the course had the option to work past papers and submit them for grading online as a soft copy submission, or in hard copy via the course office, as they completed their own self-paced learning and revision exercises for the course. All these innovations emerged through the benchmarking process, which allowed the lecturer to see "outside the box", thereby accelerating change.

**The online website meant also that students could now submit their assignments from anywhere in the world with Internet access. Additionally, benchmarking insights were imported from other universities where technology was used to enliven lecture presentations.**

## Evaluation of the Course Strategies

An evaluation of the course was conducted to obtain feedback from the main stakeholders, the students. This evaluation facilitated an ongoing review of the benchmarking strategies. From the feedback, a sense of the usage of the technologies was gauged as well as the effectiveness and enjoyability of the new teaching methods and content. Feedback came through unsolicited student letters sent to the lecturer and to the faculty dean, as well as through the establishment of an anonymous feedback box at every lecture venue. Weekly two-hour-long late-night Internet chat rooms also facilitated students' candid views to be shared among the entire class. It was also noted that pass rates for the course averaged an impressive 95 per cent, even though the course content and assessment exercises were now much more rigorous.

In the close to two years that the newly revamped course has been in operation there has been an overwhelming degree of student satisfaction in the course, which has been endorsed by the Quality Assurance Unit of the UWI. The granting of the benchmarking standard of "best course practice" by Office of the Board for Undergraduate Studies for the course is a measure of achievement, but perhaps the strongest indication of success has been the establishment of a student-driven club: the Caribbean Civilization Club, which has a membership of past students who take time off from their main study areas to voluntarily continue the course content during their university careers.

## Conclusions

Quality management is an ongoing activity that ensures that the organization remains competitive and maintains a quality of product that sets the benchmark for others to follow. At the UWI, the "Caribbean Civilization" course rose from obscurity to prominence because it sought to establish an internal benchmark where none existed before. This movement, while commendable and ultimately desirable, was never simple. Indeed, change is never easy.

A major stumbling block for any organization's change machinery is the

inertia that exists based on historical "okayness". This complacency arises from the acceptance of established practices that are familiar but not always effective: "we have always done it so" or "this is how it was given to me so I am pleased with it as is", and so on. In this context, then, we may encounter unwillingness to change or, even worse, willingness to actively block agents of change. Benchmarking within the organization is a useful and effective counter to this mindset.

By offering proven standards of excellence and cost effectiveness, benchmarking quickly makes the case for institutional change and, in the process, moves the organization's standards upwards. The success of the "Caribbean Civilization" course at the UWI was done despite resistance to change from some quarters. Success came from applying benchmarking principles of excellence and having a mover of change (the faculty dean) on board to support the process of achieving best course practice.

Benchmarking is important as it reinforces change and moves the organization forward through a process that involves (and wins over) key stakeholders and process owners. The way forward is to seek best course practice and, by so seeking, create benchmark statements that encourage flexibility to guide all UWI courses to self-actualization and towards the creation of contextual best course practices based on internationally accepted standards of excellence. Striving for excellence and setting evolving and attainable benchmarks can only become a way of life within the UWI when all players appreciate benchmarking as a legitimate tenet of the university's Caribbean foundation.

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# Benchmarking ICT Services at the UWI

PATRICK ANGLIN

The acceptance of information and communication technologies (ICTs) into mainstream higher education has led to an almost ubiquity of and dependence on all things ICT in the academy. ICTs have become so pervasive in universities and colleges that one is hard-pressed to imagine what the organization was like prior to their advent. Some cannot remember the pre-email (not to mention pre-PC) days and cannot function effectively without the crush of information that has become readily available through the use of ICTs.

The wide-ranging reliance on ICTs, from the use of a personal computer for drafting letters to communicating via instant messenger from a personal digital assistant (PDA), generates differences in perception as to what constitutes basic and efficient ICT service delivery. Issues surrounding service reliability and user tolerance to ICT outages plague the professionals responsible for providing and maintaining the ICT infrastructure. For example, average end-users will quite likely indicate that they would like, and indeed expect, to receive all their email expeditiously. Failure to meet this expectation will result in user dissatisfaction, which in the academy, due to the variety of users and their reach, can have a disastrous and multi-faceted effect.

Another perspective, however, is that of the ICT professional – the practitioner. An informal chat with any ICT professional in the first line of defence in user support, network or system administration, or even application maintenance will reveal a perception of the user of being an oftentimes demand-

ing, somewhat insensitive and possibly ignorant individual who fails to understand that while ICT services, for the most part, are guaranteed, outages will happen and should be expected. The ICT practitioner may indicate that end users (and most senior ICT managers) ought to exercise a greater degree of tolerance when ICT outages occur; after all, the services are delivered by humans through machines, none of which are infallible.

The different perspectives regarding ICT service delivery span a continuum depending on how critical the services being delivered are to the organization (or at least to the individual requiring them) and the scope and complexity of delivery. Additionally, perspectives also differ depending on which side of the service, whether consumer or provider, one finds oneself. Given the foregoing, there is a need for a set of objective criteria to measure and maintain acceptable ICT service delivery levels. There is also a need to determine from several perspectives – that of the industry generally, similar organizations operating within the industry and the organization itself – what constitutes acceptable ICT service.

Benchmarking is one method of using objective criteria to measure service delivery and is often used to optimize operations through finding and then implementing better practices. Wainwright et al. (2005) describe benchmarking as identifying the processes that require improvement, improving these processes and implementing the improvements. They further state that benchmarking ensures a continuous visit to processes in order to maintain or attain optimum efficiency and that effective deployment of benchmarking allows an organization to, inter alia, do the following:

1. Question why it conducts particular business processes
2. Gain a complete understanding of its business processes
3. Question what customers and stakeholders think of it
4. Measure and project future performance
5. Set goals and objectives for improvement
6. Implement changes
7. Learn how to continue to make improvements beyond the most superior that was found

The higher education industry is one that, by its very nature, fosters infor-

mation sharing and resource collaboration. According to Schofield (1998a, 1998b), for most institutions of higher education the desire to learn from each other and to share aspects of good practice is almost as old as the university itself. The foregoing indicates, then, that benchmarking should not be difficult to achieve in the academy and one wonders why it is that benchmarking practices are not ubiquitous in all functional areas. Fielden (1997) highlights the lessons learned by the Commonwealth Higher Education Management Service, which in 1996 launched an international "University Benchmarking Club" for primarily, but not exclusively, Commonwealth universities. Fielden states that oftentimes benchmarking efforts may fail due to the following:

- There is no unanimity about the scale and effort required to benchmark. Oftentimes the clerical analysis and costing required is too demanding for the university to consistently support given the other competing priorities.
- The question of scoring and assessment is fraught with sensitivities in the university context – who are one's "peers" and should these be the only one against whom the institution is benchmarked?
- Since differences in sizes can influence the data collected and may skew comparisons, it is necessary to have contextual indicators in order to interpret some of the statistics collected.

In order for a benchmarking initiative to be successful, the approach chosen should fit with the institution and the operation or activity being benchmarked. Additionally, benchmarking will only be effective if it is ongoing and continually compares the internal work processes with those of an external entity.

Alstete (1997) identifies four categories of benchmarking, to which a fifth, implicit benchmarking, was added by Schofield (1998a):

1. Internal benchmarking, where comparisons are made of the performance of different departments, campuses or sites within a university in order to identify best practice in the institution, without having external standards against which to compare the results.
2. External competitive benchmarking, where a comparison of performance in key areas is based upon information from institutions that are seen as competitors.

3. External collaborative benchmarking involves comparisons with a larger group of institutions who are not immediate competitors.
4. External trans-industry (best-in-class) benchmarking looks across multiple industries in search of new and innovative practices, irrespective of their source.
5. Implicit benchmarking is used in situations where the benchmarking initiative, or some variant of benchmarking, results from market pressures, central funding or coordinating agencies within individual systems.

## How to Benchmark the ICT at the UWI

Due to the pervasive and far-reaching nature of ICT, it is fair to conclude that a large quantity of the delivered ICT services are not specific to higher education but are found in industry as well. Therefore, one possible way forward is to use a hybrid approach when benchmarking the university's ICT service delivery. This approach could, for the medium-term, incorporate both external collaborative benchmarking and "best-in-class" benchmarking but for the short-term, use internal benchmarking with generalized ICT standards as a basis.

This means that even before the UWI can proceed along any sort of benchmarking path for its ICT services, it must first seek to apply international standards to its ICT service delivery. Four of the more widely used models are as follows:

1. The Information Technology Infrastructure Library (ITIL) is a set of best practices for ICT service management used by hundreds of organizations worldwide. Originally developed in the 1980s by the Central Computer and Telecommunications Agency (CCTA) in the United Kingdom, ITIL is now at version 3, which emphasizes customer service. One major focus of ITIL is continuous service improvement, that is, activities undertaken on a phased regular basis as part of a iterative process. (See http://www.itil- officialsite.com/AboutITIL/WhatisITIL .asp.)

2. The Microsoft Operations Framework (MOS) is based on the information technology service management component of the ITIL and provides operational guidance in the form of white papers, assessment tools, support tools and other services to ICT professionals. It should be noted that the MOS is specific to Microsoft products and, according to Microsoft, can be used to assess an institution's current ICT service management maturity, prioritize processes, and apply proven principles and best practices in order to confront ICT service-related issues and solve problems. (See http://www.microsoft.com/technet/solutionaccelerators/cits/mo/mof /default.mspx.)
3. The Control Objectives for Information and Related Technology (COBIT) is also a set of ICT best practices developed in 1992 by the Information Systems Audit and Control Association (ISACA) and the IT Governance Institute. Currently the ISACA has more than seventy thousand members in 140 countries and includes individuals at all levels in the ICT profession, from consultants to chief information officers. Initially published in 1996, COBIT is now at its fourth edition and includes four domains (planning and organization, acquisition and implementation, delivery, and support and monitoring) and thirty-four ICT processes. (See http:// www.isaca.org/Content/NavigationMenu /Members_and_Leaders/C OBIT6/Obtain_COBIT/Obtain_COBIT .htm.)
4. The Capability Maturity Model Integration (CMMI) is mostly used in software development and focuses on improving work processes and, by extension, improving outcomes. The model states that the quality of a system is highly influenced by the quality of the processes used to acquire, develop and maintain it. The CMMI views the process as a part of the triad, which also includes people and technology, and is the glue that holds the triad together. The CMMI process-improvement activities are a collection of best practices that provide a framework for organizing and prioritizing activities and should be used to align process activities with organizational objectives. (See http://www.sci.cmu.edu/cmmi/adoption/pdf/cmmi-overview07.pdf.)

The four models outlined above have a common theme of applying the best practices of several, often diverse, organizations in order to provide a baseline against which to measure performance. Applying one or possibly a combination of two or more of these models is a necessary pre-benchmarking exercise; failure to do this may lead to an ineffective benchmarking process. After a standard has been selected and implemented, the university will at least have a starting point that can be used to benchmark its ICT services.

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# Excellence in Library Service in a Competitive Environment

## Some Tools of the Trade

EVADNE MCLEAN, MARGARETTE PEARCE AND JOAN VACIANNA

## Introduction

Prominent among the many challenges confronting universities today is a need for higher student enrolment at both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. But, for potential clients who have increased service expectations, "the university of choice is the one that brings the greatest number of services" (Rosenquist-Buhler 1996, 220). Although it is service that drives an organization, in the twenty-first century it takes more than mere service to make an institution an "industry leader". The achievement of such a status will come from excellent service offerings by every entity within that institution. The academic library is in a unique position to help make this goal a reality for its parent constituent.

The primary aim of the academic library, considered the heart of the university, is to provide its parent institution with quality services in support of its educational mission and goals, amidst increasing economic pressure, structural change and evolving technology. Hernon and Nitecki (quoted in Derfert-Wolf, Górski and Marcinek 2005) note that in the academic library service quality includes library resources, library environment as well as service delivery by staff.

The library is assisted in its objective to deliver quality service by the output of library-based groups, non-library groups and other organizations that "work to codify common practices and develop consensus on standards for library activities" (Moen and Bertot 2000, 134). Haynes and Hopkinson (2006) posit that, to a large extent, the practice of librarianship is defined by standards. For many reasons, including geographic and educational, libraries in the English-speaking Caribbean tend to adhere more closely to standards emanating from the United States.

The objective of this article is to highlight examples of standards, guidelines and benchmarking practices on which a library can draw as it strives to provide its users with quality service.

## The Benefits of Standards to Libraries

Moen and Bertot (2000, 132) are of the view that standards are themselves problematic as they are many and not static. On the other hand, Coyle (2005) highlights the following benefits of standards. They

- create efficiencies in terms of time and cost both for libraries and their vendors;
- allow for uniformity of products;
- make it possible for all libraries to be customers of the same library system design; and
- facilitate interoperability – libraries can share data and library users can move from one library to another without having to learn entirely new bibliographic research skills.

Moen (quoted in Moen and Bertot 2000, 130) defines a standard as follows: "An agreed upon response to a recurring problem – perceived, anticipated, or real – and codifies the response for the purpose of communication. The standard is the result of a problem-solving process. It involves agreements among stakeholders who have an interest in adopting specific responses to the problem. Conformant use of the standard leads to predictable results and a reduction of uncertainty."

Standards may be general or specific; they may be bibliographic or technical. However, the best way to examine them is by their applications. Haynes and Hopkinson (2006) identify four groups: those that identify and describe (bibliographic); those for information exchange; those for managing collections; and those for service delivery.

## Standards that Identify and Describe (Bibliographic)

Resource-sharing agreements are used by academic libraries to make information available to their clients. For the library collection to be accessible there must be adherence to common practices in cataloguing and classification as well as subject analysis. Libraries have therefore come together to develop these common practices into standards that govern the way their collections are prepared for access. Examples of these in the area of cataloguing are the Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules (AACR 2) established by a joint steering committee consisting of various national institutions and professional bodies. "The rules cover the description of, and the provision of access points for, all library materials commonly collected at the present time." The joint steering committee is responsible for maintaining the Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules, and is now working on a new code, "RDA: Resource Description and Access", scheduled to be released in early 2009 (http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/jsc).

For classification, there are the Library of Congress Classification and the Dewy Decimal Classification schedules among others. Sears List of Subject Headings and the Library of Congress Subject Headings are two of the major guides for providing consistency in the use of subject headings.

There are several metadata standards, including Dublin Core Metadata Initiative, developed by the research division of Ohio College Library Centre. Dublin Core Metadata Initiative has fifteen data elements for describing documents and other objects and is now the International Standard Organization (ISO) 15836 for descriptive metadata in the Web community.

There are international standards created by non-library institutions to promote a sense of order in the library and information industry. Among these

are the International Standard Book Number (ISBN) and the International Standard Serial Number (ISSN) created by the ISO and National Information Standard Organization (NISO) an accredited organization the American National Standard Institute (ANSI). The ISSN/ISBN are unique numbers assigned by national agencies at the request of publishers, to identify a specific title and, in the case of books, differentiate between editions. In Jamaica, the agency for this is the National Library of Jamaica.

Serials, which include magazines, journals, newspapers, annuals, transactions of societies and monographic series, pose particular challenges for libraries because they are subject to constant change. The growth in the number of serials, sometimes with similar titles, and published in the same country, can cause chaos. It was as a result of this chaos that the ISO and ANSI/NISO developed the ISO 3291-1975, also called ANSI/NISO Z39.9-1979, for the identification of serials regardless of the country or language of publication.

The ISSN is a useful and economical tool of communication between publishers and suppliers. It is also used for ordering, checking in and claiming of serials in libraries. Its use results in accurate citing of serials by scholars, researchers, abstracters and librarians (http://loc.gov/issn/issnbro.html). The ISBN/ISSN also facilitate more efficient marketing of products: the acquisitions section of a library, without even mentioning the author or title of a work, can order a publication simply by quoting its number. These standards together create more user-friendly access to library materials in the print and digital formats.

## Standards Relating to Information Exchange

The current context for information access, retrieval and sharing for libraries is the networked environment, and for this, technical standards are essential as they facilitate interoperability. An example is the Library of Congress Machine Readable Cataloguing Record (MARC 21). Many libraries have management systems that can support these records so that they can migrate their catalogues on to new systems, regardless of brand, as well as purchase

standard bibliographic records from vendors. It was because of this interoperability that the University of the West Indies (UWI) libraries were able, in 2007, to migrate from the Virginia Technical Library System (VTLS) to the ALEPH Integrated Library System.

Standards developed for the Internet are created primarily by NISO and ANSI. One notable standard is the Z39.50-2003, which Moen describes as follows:

> This is a computer-to-computer communications protocol designed to support searching and retrieval of information – full-text documents, bibliographic data, images, multi-media – in a distributive network environment. Based on client/server architecture and operating over the Internet, the Z39.50 protocol is supporting an increasing number of applications. Like the dynamic network environment in which it is used, the standard is evolving to meet the changing needs of information creators, providers and users. (http://www.cni.org/pub/niso/docs/z39.50- brochure)

## Standards Relating to Managing Collections

There are standards in the area of collection management that address materials conservation, processes management and collection housing. One such standard is ANSI/NISO-Z39.73-1994, which sets minimum performance standards for single-tier steel bracket library shelving. For library binding, ANSI/NISO Z39.78 describes the technical specifications and materials to be used for binding library material.

## Standards Relating to Service Delivery

Professional library associations exist at national, regional and international levels, and very often publish standards and guidelines to improve the quality of the services offered by members. Tertiary-level institution libraries in the Jamaican community, for example, have benefited from the work of the College Libraries Information Network of the Jamaica Library Association,

now the Library and Information Association of Jamaica, which established guidelines and standards for colleges in 1980. The "Guidelines and Standards for College Libraries in Jamaica" (1996 revised edition) covers services, physical environment (including furniture and equipment), collection development, organization and retrieval of information materials, and administration.

Other national professional associations include the Society of College, National and University Libraries and Chartered Institute of Libraries and Information Professionals, both of the United Kingdom, and the American Library Association (ALA). The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), a division of ALA, "promulgates standards and guidelines to help libraries, academic institutions, and accrediting agencies understand the components of an excellent library. These standards, guidelines, and model statements are reviewed and updated by the membership on a regular basis" (http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlstandards/standardsguidelinestop ic.cfm).

## ACRL Standards for Higher Education

The ACRL has set general guidelines for service in libraries in higher education institutions. Their "Standards for Libraries in Higher Education" (2004) provides guidelines for the following:

1. An acceptable range and quality of library service
2. Instructions necessary for users to take full benefit of library services
3. Variety, quality and currency of the resources required to support the needs of the users
4. Organization of the collection
5. Types of access for on-campus as well as distance users
6. Acceptable size and composition of staff
7. Qualifications, experience and training of personnel.
8. Budget
9. Administration

In addition to its general standards, ACRL provides standards and guidelines for specific areas of library operation. Below are some that are of interest to the Mona Library.

- In response to the rapid spread in the non-traditional programmes in higher education and the recognition that the distance learning community is entitled to library services and resources, the ACRL produced "Guidelines for Distance Learning Library Services". These have undergone many revisions, with the most recent being that of 2004 (http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlstandards/guidelinesdistancelearning.cfm).
- As a result the variety of formats in which information is now available and the need for libraries to manage these new genres efficiently, the ACRL has produced "Guidelines for Media Resources in Academic Libraries", of which the most recent is 2006 (http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlstandards/mediaresources.cfm).
- The growth in publications and the myriad formats in which library resources are now presented make it necessary for library users to be given instructions in the use of these resources and services. ACRL has therefore established "Guidelines for Instructional Programmes in Academic Libraries 2003" (http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlstandards/ALA_print_layout_1_192 693_192693.cfm) as well as "Information Literacy Competency for Higher Education 2004" (http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlstandards/informationliteracycom petency.cfm).

On the international front, the International Federation of Library Associations also assists libraries to improve their services by developing statements on standards.

## Benchmarking

The efforts of the library geared at achieving quality services have not been confined to mere adherence to standards and guidelines of organizations and professional associations, however. Robertson and Trahn (1997) note that libraries have a tradition of sharing information about inputs, outputs, processes, practices and policies, and that cooperation rather than competition

has been a strong ethos. Information on best practices has been achieved formally through workshops and conferences and informally through visits to other institutions, study tours and talks with colleagues. The librarians at the Mona Library are facilitated in these activities by their annual study and travel grant from the university. They also gather information on best practices to enhance library services by reading professional journals.

There is, however, no room for complacency in the competitive environment in which the UWI now operates. With four other local and a number of offshore universities as well as a host of other tertiary-level institutions all competing for "market share", the UWI has work to do. The quality movement in higher education has intensified interest in service quality and so there must be a motivation to embark on continuous process improvement through benchmarking. The experience of the Mona Library in sharing examples of best practices should provide an entrée into this activity.

## Definition

Benchmarking offers a way of identifying better and smarter ways of doing things and understanding why they are better and smarter. It is comparing oneself with the best in the field and allowing the organization to develop plans to adopt such best practices in order to improve a particular area of its own performance (Jackson 2001).

Some benefits of benchmarking are as follows:

- It helps to overcome resistance to change by showing other ways of doing things and demonstrating that they work because they are being used successfully by others.
- It emphasizes performance data, rigorous analysis and eventual process improvement.
- It improves networking and mutual understand between participants.
- Its process of data collection and visits enjoy official status, and recommendations for action are usually endorsed by managers and operational staff members. (Robertson and Trahn 1997)

An activity may be benchmarked once, or it may be a continuous process

in which the organization continually seeks to challenge its practices. Heron and Altman (1996) believe that the latter is the more useful as continuous benchmarking can show how a situation has changed since it was last studied. For example, in the library, the continuous process could be used to determine whether items are now being shelved more quickly than the previous year. Shapiro and Long (cited in Heron and Altman 1996) note that one drawback of benchmarking is that such quality improvement programmes tend to enhance existing processes rather than aim for breakthrough changes that will replace old processes with new ones. Benchmarking activities may be classified according to the nature of the processes that underpin the activity (cited in Jackson 2001). However, these activities may combine a variety of approaches.

## Models

Jackson (2001) identifies the following benchmarking models:

1. Collaborative or group partnership
2. Collaborative one-to-one models
3. Brokered models which involve individual or agency intervening to create the collaborative models
4. Independent self-referencing models

In the collaborative group partnerships, a group of libraries commit to come together to learn more about themselves by learning about others. This process begins with the establishment of the main research topics, which are further developed by the construction of survey questions and other instruments to gather data. After the information is collected, it is analysed and synthesized. The feedback reports produced are further analysed to provide the basis for identifying benchmarks or best practices and for understanding why these are so. Participants would then adjust their procedures according to the insight gained.

In the collaborative one-to-one partnership, the library identifies a partner who is a leader in the field in the process it wishes to benchmark. Because this is a one-to-one relationship, the information-gathering process could include telephone calls, visits and interviews, as well as survey instruments. The infor-

mation collected is synthesized by the lead institution and shared with the partner. The advantage of this model is that the library can develop several one-to-one partnerships to benchmark specific processes that are of key concern to the fulfilment of its strategic objectives.

The independent self-referencing model is non-collaborative. This requires the library to assess its own performance by matching its data with published statistics of comparable academic libraries.

In the brokered model, a consultant, a specialized agency or an organizational broker acts as an intermediary in one of the collaborative or independent models.

## Towards Benchmarking in the UWI Mona Library

Since the Mona Library will be a new entrant in the benchmarking arena, it would perhaps be prudent to use the collaborative one-to-one model, which is the simpler of the two collaborative methods. After a review of the literature, the authors of this article recommend the following benchmarking steps for the UWI Mona Library:

- Identify funding
- Develop understanding of the skill in benchmarking
- Identify process(es) to be benchmarked
- Aggregate process documentation
- Identify benchmarking partners
- Prepare to benchmark
- Benchmark
- Implement improvements
- Improve benchmark process(es)

## Steps for Implementation

There are many costs associated with the benchmarking exercise and, therefore, the university librarian should identify funding for the purpose. These

include costs for training and for visits. Since benchmarking is a time-consuming exercise which may take persons away from their regular duties, the Mona Library might be forced to employ additional staff.

1. UWI Library should introduce the concept of benchmarking to all staff members. This will be important for buy-in as the library seeks to implement recommendations for improvement. Persons who will be involved in the process should later receive further training in the skills of benchmarking. Training should also be extended to the partner being benchmarked. For this purpose, the Library could enlist the support of UWI faculty members who have expertise in this area or outside help.
2. A quality assurance committee to implement the project could also be established and its chairperson would be the project coordinator. This committee would be responsible for identifying the process or processes to be benchmarked. Representatives from staff who work with the process(es) identified for benchmarking should then be co-opted into the committee. The process(es) identified should be important in the fulfilment of the Library's strategic objectives.
3. Having identified the process(es) to be benchmarked, the committee should prepare the relevant documentation in which the process is defined and described. Performance indicators should be identified and the tools for collecting the data should be designed.
4. The Library Quality Assurance Committee would also set the criteria for the selection of the benchmarking partner. These should allow for valid performance comparisons. One such criterion should require the partner to be a university library. Sources for identifying a potential partner include the Internet, academic journals, as well as workshops and conferences.
5. Preliminary communications between the heads of both university libraries should take place to establish the potential partner's willingness to participate in the exercise. This would be followed by more formal correspondence setting out the details of the project. Meetings between the parties should later establish the basic parameters of the project and this would be followed by a signed agreement which may include such issues as confidentiality.

6. Proceed to benchmark. This will involve the collection of performance data using the tools developed by the Library Quality Assurance Committee.
7. Analyse the data collected, taking care that information is correctly interpreted. This is perhaps the most challenging aspect of the project. Data may include responses to questionnaires, reports on observations and discussions during visits, and statistical information, among others. The coordinator is responsible for producing a final report and recommendations for implementing the best practice(s). Recommended changes may be revolutionary but should, nevertheless, be manageable.
8. Having invested considerable resources in the benchmarking exercise, it is expected that the recommendations will be implemented. This should lead to an improvement in the process(es) benchmarked and ultimately to service quality improvement.
9. Since benchmarking should be a continuous process, the final responsibility of the Library Quality Assurance Committee is to review the processes, procedures and instruments that were used with a view to enhancing them for future use.

## Conclusion

The library and information field has promulgated many standards and guidelines that have benefited its constituents. It has also been the beneficiary of standards from non-library sources. The latter have been especially useful for accessing information in the networked community. However, it is through the benchmarking of its processes and the implementation of best practices that the Mona Library will be able to support the effort of the UWI to remain the "industry leader" in the higher education landscape in the Caribbean.

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# Quality Assurance at the University of the West Indies

## Challenges, Constraints and Successes

SANDRA GIFT, JACQUELINE MONIQUETTE AND ANNA KASAFI PERKINS

## Introduction

The University of the West Indies (UWI) had its beginnings as the University College of the West Indies in 1947, a college of the University of London, and was subsequently inaugurated by Royal Charter as the UWI, an independent degree-granting university in 1962. The Royal Charter has always served as a most valuable accreditation for the UWI, and together with attention to quality from its inception, the UWI has over the years built and maintained an international reputation for excellence. However, it is as a result of the implementation of a full system of quality audit and quality assurance, one of the recommendations of the Chancellor's Commission on Governance which in 1993–94 undertook a major internal study of the governance of the university, that the issue of quality took centre stage. The Board for Undergraduate Studies, which began its work in 1996, was given the responsibility for the development and implementation of this system. At that time, several provisions were already in place to assure quality. These included

- Systems for course and programme approval
- Procedures for student assessment of courses
- An examination system of external, university, and first and second exam-

iners who set and moderate examination papers and mark and second mark examination scripts.
- The establishment of Instructional Development Units (IDUs) on each campus to enhance teaching delivery

Additional measures were introduced as the need arose, including:

- Facilitating preliminary studies (as done in the Natural Sciences and Agriculture) to allow for the adequate preparation of students to meet normal entry requirements for successful completion of the three-year undergraduate course
- Developing processes for articulating with other tertiary level institutions (TLIs), and assessing whether credit would be given by the UWI to TLI qualifications for purposes of admission to UWI programmes
- International accreditation of professional programmes, such as engineering, medical sciences and the Master of Business Administration

With the creation of the Quality Assurance Unit (QAU) in 2001, the concept of quality became firmly rooted in the psyche and functioning of the UWI. The unit has an office on each campus, and its major remit is the periodic review of academic programmes at both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels with the aim of maintaining and raising the quality of the learning experience of students. The impact of programme review on the quality of teaching and learning, as evident in the outcomes of the quality assurance review process, is the focus of this paper.

## The UWI Model of Programme Review

The system of programme review that UWI uses is grounded in the concept of quality, "fitness for purpose", adopted by the Board for Undergraduate Studies and the Board for Graduate Studies and Research. This concept of quality is utilized by many policymakers in the higher education sector internationally and relates quality to the purpose of the service provided; quality is then judged in terms of the extent to which the service meets its stated objectives. It "enables the determination of programme goals, objectives, content,

approaches to assessment, etc. to reside with the academic staff of an institution while the evaluation of how effectively these are being realized is performed by others" (Bell-Hutchinson, Gift and Moniquette 2006). The primary aim of this system is to improve the quality of the learning experience of UWI students and provide assurance to stakeholders as to the quality of provision and standards at the university.

The periodic reviews of teaching of the disciplines are normally undertaken in five-year cycles. The quality assurance programme review system at the UWI is formative and developmental in nature, with a primary aim of raising the quality of the learning experience provided.

The review process comprises five phases:

1. QAU consultations
2. The self-assessment exercise
3. The visit of the review team
4. Submission of the review team's report
5. Follow-up of the recommendations by the department/unit

The system involves a review team of at least three persons: an external academic; a professional in the discipline, external to the UWI; and a senior member of academic staff from another campus. Although administered by the QAU, the work of the review team is independent, though guided by the UWI quality assurance officers who manage the system. The quality assurance officers facilitate the work of the teams and ensure the integrity of the process. Review teams study the self-assessment report, prepared by the department/discipline under review and conduct meetings with stakeholders so as to obtain an unbiased view from which recommendations can be made for the improvement of courses. To date, almost all of UWI programmes have been reviewed at least once and some are in their second cycle of reviews. The officers of the QAU, in liaison with the Office of the Deputy Principal and, on one campus, the Academic Quality Assurance Committee, monitor follow-up action taken regarding the recommendations of review teams. The reports on action taken feed into subsequent programme review exercises.

In addition, the quality assurance programme officers evaluate UWI systems and procedures to determine whether they are sufficient to monitor quality and make recommendations for their enhancement. The Office of the

Board for Undergraduate Studies also conducts surveys of internal and external stakeholder perceptions of the UWI learning environment and of UWI graduates. The findings of these surveys are used to inform the development of strategies for the continuous enhancement of UWI offerings, systems and procedures.

With respect to its academic aims and objectives, the university also embraces the criterion of quality that speaks to the maintenance of standards and the relevance of programmes and research. The expectation is that the creation and dissemination of relevant knowledge of the required standard will address the needs of national and regional communities and that knowledge generation in general will add value to international academic endeavours.

## Key Elements of the UWI System of Programme Review

The evaluation of teaching quality must take into account the wide variety of stakeholder interest in higher education. Douglas and Douglas (2006, 6) note that stakeholders have "their own view of what quality in education means to them". This implies that key quality indicators must reflect a diversity of opinion. The multiple indicators employed within the system of programme review at the UWI do in fact mirror this approach and include the following:

- Publication of a set of clearly defined aims and objectives
- Broad, systematic and effective monitoring of the achievement of the aims and objectives
- Periodic examination and revision of the curriculum
- Monitoring of the student learning experience, including the teaching, learning and assessment methods utilized
- Monitoring of the standards of the student learning outcomes
- Providing student support
- Collection and use of student feedback on the courses and programmes
- Collection and use of quantitative data on the student profile and performance
- Collection and use of external opinion on courses and programmes
- Rapid response to the issues identified by stakeholders

- Monitoring the quantum and quality of the resources available to support student learning
- Appropriate and effective orientation arrangements for all new members of staff
- Systematic approaches to identifying the training needs of staff
- Participation of staff in development activities, including attention to teaching and assessment methods
- Systematic documentation of the active involvement of the department in quality assurance procedures

## Notable Features of Programme Reviews

This article's attention to the outcomes of the UWI quality assurance system of programme review is reflective of the recommendation of the United Kingdom's Dearing Report (1997), that quality assurance should be more focused on outcomes (Ottewill and Macfarlane 2004). (For the purpose of this discussion the terms programme review and subject review are used interchangeably.) The UWI system of programme review reflects three notable features as discussed by Ottewill and Macfarlane (2004):

1. The subject review is wide ranging in subject areas and levels of courses covered. At the UWI, subject reviews cover both the undergraduate and postgraduate programmes.
2. It is also wide ranging in terms of the framework of evaluation. At the UWI, this framework encompasses: (a) aims and objectives of the programme, (b) curriculum, (c) teaching and learning, (d) student profile, assessment and learning outcomes, (e) resources for teaching and learning, and (f) quality assurance and enhancement. This framework of evaluation ensures some degree of consistency in the way programmes are reviewed and findings presented across the various campuses of the university.
3. The provision of guidelines for review teams avoids accusations of the use of hidden criteria. At the UWI this is further enhanced as quality assurance officers, who function as the institutional facilitators of

programme reviews, have full access to meetings of the review teams during the visit.

## Criticisms of Programme Reviews

The process of carrying out subject reviews has been subject to a number of critiques. In the United Kingdom, for example, quality assurance subject review reports have been criticized for their tendency to be "written in a fairly bland style" (Ottewill and Macfarlane 2004, 233). At the UWI it has been noted that review teams are often wary about seeming to be unduly harsh in their criticisms. Nonetheless, the UWI quality assurance programme officers stress during team briefings the importance of pointing out shortcomings in appropriate language and with due regard for evidenced-based conclusions. This is in keeping with the emphasis placed on the formative and developmental intent of the review process.

In the United Kingdom, the grading system that was used was considered to be misleading. At the UWI, programme review reports are not presented quantitatively. Rather, review reports are highly qualitative with a view to communicating as fully as possible an appreciation of the ways in which contextual characteristics impact upon the quality of teaching and learning as well as generating recommendations to address those that undermine quality.

## Response of Academic Staff to Programme Reviews

Programme reviews can add value to the quality of teaching and learning. Feedback received through the current UWI strategic planning process indicates that the UWI model of quality assurance is valued by the academic staff and that they are especially concerned that there should be meaningful follow-up to the reviews. This was surprising but welcome feedback as the QAU has not yet conducted a quality evaluation of its own operations, though one is scheduled. The feedback is surprising since, in the process of arranging these

reviews of teaching programmes, the quality assurance programme officers have sometimes found that, initially, academics tend to accord the review process low priority but that this changes once the review exercise has been completed, when they look forward to both the oral feedback and the actual review report. In the past, too, the follow-up to the recommendations of review teams has not always been an area of focus, but this has changed with more attention being given to this area by the administration itself and by the Office of the Board for Undergraduate Studies in particular.

## Intended and Actual Outcomes of the UWI Quality Assurance System of Programme Review

It is timely to assess the nature of the impact of programme reviews on the quality of teaching and learning at the UWI, given that this aspect of the UWI's quality assurance system has been implemented for close to ten years now. This assessment focused on the period 2002–2006. The authors discuss the intended and actual outcomes of programme reviews on the quality of the teaching and learning experience as indicated by curriculum design, delivery and relevance, assessment, standards, and resources. The data presented is drawn from the quality assurance review reports of twenty-nine programmes/departments/units from across the three campuses.

## Curriculum Design and Delivery

The intended broad outcomes of the UWI system of academic quality assurance are reflected in the document *Preparing for a Review: Undertaking the Self-Assessment*. These intended outcomes mirror international standards in higher education. UWI academic programmes are expected to be relevant, up-to-date and informed by research; to employ varied teaching approaches and modes of delivery; to articulate appropriate aims and objectives; and to meet the criteria of sufficient choice and range of programmes and courses. It is also expected that increased focus should be placed on the quality of graduate pro-

grammes. The outcomes of the peer review process on which the UWI system of programme review is based are indicative of the recommendations made by review teams and implemented at both departmental and faculty levels. The outcomes reported in this article may also be accepted as being indicative of the successes of the UWI quality assurance system of programme reviews. Over the period 2002–2006, curricula have been revised, the result being the clarification of aims and objectives; wider choices of programmes; as well as new and revised courses and programmes being offered. There has been greater integration of information technology in teaching; more internships; recruitment of additional staff in specialist areas; the use of more effective pedagogy with the support of the IDU; improved documentation of processes in some instances; and increased focus on the quality of graduate teaching and supervision. The matter of increased support for graduate students is also being addressed.

## Standards

In the area of standards, it is expected that there is uniform marking and grading of assignments and examinations and satisfactory student results; ongoing staff development; and working with the quality assurance system in order to assure stakeholders of the quality of UWI programmes. Some actual outcomes relevant to standards include the development of handbooks of procedures; implementation of the various recommendations of review teams; staff training; and compliance with standards of national and international accreditation bodies.

## Assessment

Assessment is meant to serve as a teaching and learning tool with feedback being provided in a timely fashion It should employ a range of strategies, be valid and reliable, and lead to satisfactory results. At the UWI actual outcomes relating to assessment include review of examination procedures and regula-

tions; staff being trained in best practices; and the implementation of new assessment strategies, such as table marking. On one campus, one review team has recommended less focus on assessment and a greater focus on learning.

## Relevance

The quality of UWI programmes is judged to be relevant to the extent that they prepare students for further study and the job market and enhance their personal development. The relevance of UWI programmes is confirmed on the basis of student and employer feedback, inter alia. The UWI initiatives that address the issue of relevance include curriculum reviews, surveys of employers, exit surveys, increased partnership with potential employers and improved student services.

## Resources

Where resources are concerned, it is intended that financial, human and material resources are adequate to the needs of the student body as they relate to budget, teaching/technical/support staff, classroom and laboratory space, library and information technology, among others.

Actual outcomes that have been dictated both by the increase in student intake and the recommendations of review teams include more and better-equipped classrooms, refurbished laboratories, improvement in staff/student ratios, better laboratory and information technology resources, and the recruitment of more highly qualified staff.

**The outcomes of the peer review process on which the UWI system of programme review is based are indicative of the recommendations made by review teams and implemented at both departmental and faculty levels. The outcomes reported in this article may also be accepted as being indicative of the successes of the UWI quality assurance system of programme reviews.**

# Successes of the UWI Quality Assurance System of Programme Review

## Contributions to the Scholarship of Teaching

The expectation that programme review at the UWI would contribute to the scholarship of teaching is not unreasonable as programme/subject review shares common values with the scholarship of teaching. The scholarship of teaching refers to reflecting critically on teaching; being willing "to share good or best practice based on pedagogic research" (Ottewill and Macfarlane 2004, 231); and to the interdependence between practice and educational research. It has as its goal the rigorous evaluation of practice in order to enhance the quality of the student learning experience. Two common values shared by programme/subject review and the scholarship of teaching are the communication and dissemination of information relating to discipline-specific teaching and learning practices and ensuring transparency of the ways in which "learning is made possible" (Ottewill and Macfarlane 2004, 232). This is one area of success of the UWI quality assurance system. Quality assurance review reports identify and commend good teaching practice where relevant as well as highlight areas of weaknesses to be addressed with the support of the IDU.

In their analysis of 162 review reports of business and management programmes produced over the period 2000–2001, Ottewill and Macfarlane (2004) identified several pedagogic principles that they deemed to have informed the judgements of reviewers. These included pedagogic pluralism, learner participation, consistency, collaboration, stakeholder involvement and embedding good practice. These principles are, to varying degrees, reflected in the outcomes of the UWI quality assurance programme reviews discussed above but need to be more widely and deeply reflected in all UWI programmes as the university sets its sails in the winds of quality enhancement as opposed to merely sailing on the seas of quality assurance.

# Pedagogic Pluralism

Pedagogic pluralism, which is highly desirable, refers to the delivery of courses and programmes using a wide variety of teaching methods and assessment

practices reflective of the many facets of learning outcomes and diverse learning styles. To the extent that, at the UWI, there has been greater integration of information technology in teaching, more internships, recruitment of additional staff in specialist areas, greater use being made of the IDU for more effective pedagogy, and the implementation of new assessment strategies, programme review has been contributing to pedagogic pluralism. Within any given cohort of students there is likely to be a variety of learning styles which may have a correlation with academic performance (Marriott and Marriott 2003 cited in Ottewill and Macfarlane 2004, 238). If learning, teaching and assessment strategies are to reflect the characteristics of all students, this implies the need for a plurality of pedagogic strategies. With the decision to increase access and the consequent surge in student numbers in the past three years, the range of student abilities has significantly widened and, concomitantly, the variety of learning styles. The importance of ensuring pedagogic pluralism at the UWI takes on added meaning in this context.

## Collaboration/Stakeholder Involvement

Built into the process of programme review are a number of interviews and interactions with internal as well as external stakeholders. Their input directly influences the recommendations made in review reports and thus helps to align the intended and actual outcomes of the UWI programme reviews. It is this type of collaboration and stakeholder involvement as well as the timely implementation of these recommendations that go a long way in enhancing the quality of teaching and learning at the UWI. Collaboration has been taking place among academics and information technology specialists, library staff, the IDU, technical and support staff, laboratory technicians, administrative staff, and potential employers of UWI graduates. Certainly, the picture is not an ideal one where potential employers are concerned, but there is indeed an increasing collaboration with this group of stakeholders to inform curriculum review and implementation as well as to facilitate job placements for UWI graduates. The World of Work Seminar on one campus, for example, which attracts a large number of potential employers, is very

successful. Ottewill and Macfarlane (2004) make two key observations that underscore the importance of collaboration/stakeholder involvement: (1) the delivery of higher education is a collective endeavour, and (2) the firmly held belief in the need for sensitivity to stakeholders' interests and being prepared to act on their behalf.

## Embedding Good/Wise Practice

Embedding good practice is another principle of quality enhancement and reviewers whose reports Ottewill and Macfarlane (2004) analysed looked for the robust application of this principle through staff development initiatives in particular. This principle has been applied at the UWI with some measure of success. New members of academic staff on one campus are now contractually obliged to attend induction programmes run by the IDU for new staff, and on all campuses student feedback, through end-of-course evaluation exercises, is used to assess teaching quality. Where warranted, academic staff are asked to access the services of the IDU to address challenges in teaching. In addition, the IDU mounts courses on current issues relevant to the scholarship of teaching in higher education for the benefit of all academic staff. Two concerns in this regard are that a relatively small number of academic staff access these IDU courses and that, generally, the younger members of staff do so while senior academics, who may be most in need of refreshing their pedagogic skills, ignore the IDU. This success can be viewed as only partial, therefore, and points to the need for continuing and more aggressive efforts to address teaching quality among all categories of academic staff.

At a wider institutional level good/wise practice is being embedded across the university in the following ways:

- QAU staff working as a team across the UWI, while servicing the needs of a particular campus
- The decision to use a common team leader to produce one university report that analyses the strengths and weaknesses of programme delivery across campuses, in addition to specific campus reports
- The setting up of academic quality assurance committees on each campus

with responsibility for monitoring the quality of programme/course development, follow-up to recommendations of review teams and so on
- Establishment of university-wide committees to examine and make recommendations for enhancing graduate studies and the system of examinations, recommendations that are currently being implemented
- Increasing cross-campus collaboration in the development of new courses and programmes
- Wide-ranging consultations across and within campuses in developing the "Draft Strategic Plan, 2007–2012"

## Challenges and Future Strategies for Academic Quality Assurance

### Adding Value

The best universities are said to be those that "provide the greatest 'added value' " (Brown 2003 cited in Ottewill and Macfarlane 2004). This represents one area of challenge for the UWI, since, traditionally, the student population has consisted of the best of the graduates of the Caribbean secondary school system. The principle underlying this admissions policy has been that if the UWI attracts the best students, then the quality of its graduates is assured. The "Draft Strategic Plan, 2007–2012" notes, however, that today "student intake represents a much broader range of aptitudes and abilities as enrolment has expanded to facilitate access to higher education" (UWI 2007, 11). This has resulted in a greater diversity of "learning abilities, learning styles and levels of preparation" (13). The plan identifies teaching and learning as a strategic focus and recognizes the challenge of finding "innovative ways to develop in all . . . students the desirable critical thinking and problem-solving skills, self-reliance, self-direction, self-motivation and the motivation to be lifelong learners" (13). It accepts that this will require a variety of approaches and opportunities for learning and a learning environment that is student-centred, healthy and intellectually stimulating, one that makes full use of modern information and communication technology, among other things. A key challenge for the UWI will be to add value to this more diverse student popula-

tion by ensuring the transformative potential of education through consistent enhancement of teaching quality. Felder and Brent (1999, 10) define good teaching as "instruction that leads to effective learning, which in turn means thorough and lasting acquisition of the knowledge, skills and values the instructor of the institution has set out to impart". In the Caribbean context, good teaching must also be seen as instruction that contributes to the shaping of the ideal Caribbean citizen as enunciated by the Caribbean Community (CARICOM): someone who, among other things, is "emotionally secure . . . demonstrates multiple literacies", has "a positive work ethic", and "values and displays the creative imagination" (http://www.Caricom.org/jsp/communications/meetings_statements/ci tizens_21_century.jsp?menu=communications #VISION).

## Resources

Ottewill and Macfarlane (2004, 235) note that in the United Kingdom 68 per cent (n = 162) of the institutions whose subject review reports they analysed had learning resource strategies in place. During the period of the 2002–2007 strategic plan, the actual UWI resource strategy in practice seemed to have been mainly to increase intake in order to demonstrate to the governments contributing to the funding of the university the demand for higher education so that they would provide the necessary funding. Overall, this model has met with limited success. The "Draft Strategic Plan, 2007–2012" therefore identifies the need to invest in "upgrading and expanding the physical environment, including the provision of adequate infrastructure to cater to the growth in the student numbers" (UWI 2007, 14). The plan articulates a resource strategy labelled "Funding the Enterprise". A strategic aim of the plan is essentially to broaden the university's funding base, while continuing to rely on contributions from regional governments for a significant proportion of its funding. The resource strategy thus envisions the following mix of strategies:

- further growth in earned income facilitated by restructuring and strengthening of the Business Development Offices
- Formation of the University Consultancy Company

- Planned alumni giving and establishment of a UWI endowment fund
- Cost recovery through tuition fees, accompanied by appropriately designed student-financing support schemes
- Leveraging of real property and other assets to facilitate access to private sector funding sources. (UWI 2007, 45)

The issue of resources is likely to be a critical challenge for the UWI in the years ahead if funding the enterprise fails to keep apace with its expansion. The UWI must engage in the type of research and programme development that would create niche markets and attract international funding. It must market itself as a source of solutions to regional and international development problems to earn revenue to support the enterprise. This would require strategic and efficient use of existing human resources, a willingness to dare to think differently and to take risks. Branding the enterprise to be attractive to a discerning international higher education market would need to be part of this effort.

## Consistency

As individual campuses receive more government funding and become increasingly responsive to national imperatives, the issue of assuring common standards across the three UWI campuses must be kept on the front burner. Maintaining consistency of standards over time must be considered within the context of strengthening regionality, which is one distinctive feature of the UWI. Strategies envisaged to advance the objective of strengthening the regionality of the UWI include promotion and propagation of best practices across the institution and intensified cross-campus collaboration "in relation to curriculum development joint-delivery of programmes, co-supervision of research students, research work, staff visits" (UWI 2007, 33).

Valid and reliable assessment together with uniformity in marking and grading are the other platforms on which consistency of standards must rest in order to ensure that on individual campuses, the consistency of the quality of programmes is maintained and enhanced. To this end, the recently instituted training to improve staff capabilities in the area of assessment is a step

in the right direction, but greater staff participation is a necessity if the desired outcomes are to be attained.

## Learner Participation

While active learning is an intended outcome of the UWI quality assurance system, it continues to represent an area of challenge, in part because of the continued use of teaching approaches in the education system as a whole that encourage students to remain heavily dependent upon their teachers for their learning. Students' initial expectation of lecturers at the UWI tends not to be very different from the expectations they had of their secondary school teachers. In the study undertaken by Ottewill and Macfarlane (2004), reviewers seemed to view favourably teaching practices and techniques that succeeded in motivating students to become involved in the learning process. Student interaction was identified as evidence of high-quality teaching. Deep learning is what is considered to be effective learning and a prerequisite for this is the student engaging with learning tasks at both the affective and cognitive levels (Marton and Saljo 1976 cited in Ottewill and Macfarlane 2004, 238).

The shift from passive to active learning demands the inclusion of teaching strategies known to be particularly effective in assisting students to play a more active role in their own learning. Success in achieving greater learner participation requires lecturers using such strategies as active learning exercises that address a variety of objectives and cooperative learning to involve students in teamwork to accomplish an assigned task and produce a final product. Positive interdependence, individual accountability, face-to-face promotive interaction, appropriate use of teamwork skills and regular self-assessment of team functioning are some of the characteristics of cooperative learning (Johnson, Johnson and Smith 1998 cited in Felder and Brent 1999, 12). Compared with students taught conventionally, students who have been engaged in cooperative learning "exhibit better grades on common tests; greater persistence through graduation; better analytical, creative, and critical thinking skills; deeper understanding of learned material; greater intrinsic motivation to learn and achieve; better relationships with peers; more positive

attitudes toward subject areas; lower levels of anxiety and stress; and higher self-esteem" (ibid.). Both staff and students must therefore embrace approaches to teaching and learning that lead to the positive outcomes described above.

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