

ASSURING QUALITY IN BELIZEAN HIGHER EDUCATION:
A COLLECTIVE CASE STUDY OF INSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVES AND
PRACTICES

by

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ASSURING QUALITY IN BELIZEAN HIGHER EDUCATION:
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Neulin Nelson Villanueva, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska, 2012

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This qualitative research study used a collective case study design to explore quality assurance practices and perceptions within Belize's higher education institutions. Despite the passage of the National Accreditation Council of Belize Act (NACB Act) in 2004, the Council was never established and there remains, to date, no formal external quality assurance system in Belize. This study provides useful information for those policymakers and institutional leaders contemplating a way forward.

In-depth interviews were conducted with 17 academic leaders, including 2 presidents, 1 provost, 13 deans, and 1 quality assurance officer, drawn from 10 of the 12 existing local higher education institutions in the country. On-site visits were made to each institution and relevant documents were collected and analyzed. Data collection and analysis focused on concepts of quality, internal quality assurance strategies, perceptions on external quality assurance, and implications for the NACB Act.

The findings revealed that institutions and academic leaders conceptualize quality in both traditional (excellence) and contemporary terms (fitness-for-purpose and transformation). Structures and systems for internal quality assurance were found to be lacking; however, some promising practices were also noted. Participants agreed that there is a need for an external quality assurance system, particularly to set minimum

standards and control entry into the sector. They described their preference for a locally-based system that is funded primarily by the government, but fully autonomous in its operations. This vision, however, is not in perfect alignment with either the system called for in the NACB Act or the sector's political, social, and economic contexts.

The study concludes by recommending a full review of the NACB Act, development of a conceptual framework and comprehensive strategy for quality assurance, and improvements to the internal quality assurance structures and processes within institutions. Recommendations for future research include qualitative and quantitative studies with other groups of stakeholders and with other categories of institutions.

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PREVIEW

Acknowledgments

This has been an amazing journey for a little girl who dared to dream. To all those who helped to guide me along this path, I say, “Thank you!”

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Background

As higher education shifts from being primarily a private enterprise to taking on significant public importance, countries world-wide are paying greater attention to the regulation and promotion of quality within their higher education sectors. They have good reasons to do so. According to Blackmur (2007), governments' regulation of higher education quality is often associated with policies aimed at promoting economic development and equity, increasing accountability and transparency, responding to public opinion, preventing market failure, or protecting consumers. Faced with rapid globalization and economic uncertainty, governments and educational leaders also endeavor to ensure that the quality of their higher education systems meets international standards, and does so at minimal cost.

In November of 2004, the National Assembly of Belize passed the National Accreditation Council of Belize Act ([NACB Act], 2005). The Act was signed into law in January of 2005 by the Governor General of Belize, signaling Belize's entry into this major international trend of regulating and promoting quality in higher education. The passage of the NACB Act was part of a regional Caribbean Community (CARICOM) initiative to establish national accreditation systems, the primary aim of which was to ensure comparability of standards and free movement of labor among member countries (Roberts, 2003). The Act was fashioned from a template circulated by CARICOM and provided for the establishment of the National Accreditation Council of Belize; however, that accreditation council was never established and there remains, to date, no formal system in place for assuring the quality of Belize's higher education sector.

Failure to implement the Act by the previous, as well as the current political administration (which came into office in March of 2008), is likely associated with perceived deficiencies in the financial, human and informational resources needed to operate an accreditation system. Other significant contributing factors may include competing national and institutional priorities and the absence of a coordinating body or policy framework for higher education. Currently, the Ministry of Education's three-person Tertiary, Post-secondary and Adult Continuing Education Unit lacks the resources, expertise and legal guidance needed to monitor, coordinate, and develop the sector effectively (Hoare, 2007). This leaves higher education planning uncoordinated, institutions unregulated, and institutional leaders generally free to adopt the institutional policies and practices they deem necessary or convenient.

Complicating the issue is that although the NACB Act provides a legal framework for the establishment of an external quality assurance body, no accompanying regulations specifying the criteria, standards, or procedures to be used in assuring quality exist. Therefore, it is unknown at this time, what would be expected of institutions and how prepared they are to participate in the proposed external quality assurance program. Major questions remain such as (a) How will the Council be funded? (b) How will indicators, standards, and expectations be developed? (c) Will the process used by the Council emphasize accountability or improvement? (d) Will accreditation in Belize be voluntary or compulsory and for which institutions? and (e) How will the results of assessments be used?

The need for revisiting the legal framework of the NACB Act in light of the recently enacted Belize Education and Training Act ([BET Act], 2010) is also clear. The

BET Act makes no mention of the NACB Act and, in some cases, appears to infringe on the legal authority of the accreditation council. There also is no mention in the NACB Act of several laws such as the Nurses and Midwives Registration Act (2000) or the Professional Engineers Registration Act (2003) which provide professional bodies with the legal authority to develop, approve, and enforce training and licensing requirements. This situation could easily result in duplication of efforts and conflicts between the accreditation council and various professional bodies.

As Hoare (2007) confirmed, the NACB Act was developed from an externally-derived template with only minimal input from local stakeholders. Coupled with the fact that it was an initiative of the previous political administration, there appears to be a lack of ownership for the legislation by institutions and the current political administration and no obligation on either side to implement it. Although the new administration pledged in its 2008 manifesto to operationalize the Council, their focus thus far has been on reform at the primary and secondary levels of education. Additionally, some senior officials within the current administration have expressed uncertainty about the practicality of a Belizean accreditation system and instead were contemplating a possible regional solution to the problem (Villanueva, 2010a). In any case, there is need for guidance on how to proceed.

Although there are existing studies, mostly dissertations, on several aspects of the Belizean higher education system, none has looked specifically or comprehensively at institutional perspectives and practices in relation to quality assurance. For example, Aird (2003), Bennett (2008), and Wilson (1978) provided historical accounts; Braun (1970), Palacio (1973), Rosado (1990), Thompson (2008), Tillett (1973), and Wright (2005)

covered technical, vocational and teacher education; Cuellar (1999), Ogaldez (2003), and Tun (2004) focused specifically on the University of Belize, and Hoare (2007) concentrated on governance, finance, and curriculum.

Undoubtedly, countries wishing to develop and maintain a successful external quality assurance system must rely on relevant research. Implementing an effective external quality assurance system is complex in any context, but a number of recent studies highlight the additional challenges of implementing and maintaining effective national quality assurance systems in a developing context (Alashloo, Castka & Sharp, 2005; Genis, 2002; Marshall, 2007; Mehralizadeh et al., 2007; Reisberg, 2007; Roberts, 2003). Currently, no study is available to provide guidance on implementing such a system in the Belizean context.

An in-depth study of institutional perceptions and practices related to quality assurance could help to create better understanding of the possible opportunities for and potential challenges to implementing an accreditation system or any other type of quality assurance system in Belize. This information can help to guide stakeholders and policymakers in deciding whether the NACB Act should be repealed, amended, or implemented as is. The delay in implementation of a quality assurance system also provides the country with a unique opportunity to learn from the successes and challenges of other systems. This is not to say that more mature systems are without problems. External quality assurance is a relatively recent phenomenon for most countries. As the literature shows, there are many unanswered questions regarding the actual impact and benefits of existing models of quality assurance systems (Brittingham, 2008; Dill & Massy et al., 1996; Eaton et al., 2005) and many more questions about their

transferability across national boundaries (Kells, 1999; Lemaitre, 2002; Lim, 1999; Reisberg 2007).

Critics of the accountability movement warn that identifying and implementing what seems to be a relevant and excellent scheme may not necessarily bring about the expected results. Sometimes even the best laid plans and strategies fail to produce tangible improvements in quality. For example, Davies, Douglas, and Douglas (2007) found significant variations when comparing how quality systems were intended to operate and how they were actually implemented. The general principle emanating from the literature is that the proof of a quality assurance system's effectiveness is actual quality improvement as opposed to just superficial compliance.

Additionally, research findings show that aspects of institutional culture, such as leadership perceptions and actions, may be more important in bringing about change and improvements in quality than establishing or adopting external standards and processes, and that attitudes, beliefs, and actions of key institutional personnel play a central role in determining whether quality assurance mechanisms succeed or fail (Brunetto & Farr-Wharton, 2005; João Rosa, Tevares & Amaral, 2006; Mehralizadeh et al., 2007; Osseo-Asare, Longbottom & Murphy, 2005; Telford & Masson, 2005; Welsh & Metcalf, 2003). Genis (2002) recommends that quality assurance systems create a balance between compliance with external (quality assurance) standards and norms and institutional (quality improvement) initiatives. This is to avoid the "game playing," "performances" and "impression management" referred to by Newton (2002). Also, institutional structures and processes must be able to support a culture of learning and evaluation if

quality assurance initiatives are to result in actual improvements in quality (Dill, 1999; Kells, 1995).

It makes sense to resolve or at least become aware of these contextual issues prior to developing and implementing a quality assurance system. Mizikaci (2006) advocates a three-pronged model for developing and implementing quality systems in higher education institutions. She recommends, as a first step, that the current state of the institution be described and that the needs and expectations of stakeholders be assessed. This exercise would entail an exploration of both conceptual issues (e.g., the values, beliefs, and attitudes of major decision-makers within institutions regarding the concept(s) of quality, purpose(s) of higher education, and approaches to quality assurance), as well as contextual issues (e.g., institutional infrastructure, guiding policies, current practices, and the historical, political and socioeconomic environment in which institutions operate).

Problem Statement

There is currently no external quality assurance system in place for higher education institutions in Belize. Although the National Accreditation Council of Belize Act ([NACB], 2005) was intended to fill that void, the law has not been operationalized. Research is needed to guide policy makers and stakeholders on the best way forward. The decision to amend, repeal, or implement the NACB Act needs to be informed by a clear understanding of how quality assurance is currently perceived and practiced in the institutions that comprise the higher education sector and the contextual issues that may have an impact on the implementation of an external quality assurance system. This

information can promote understanding of some of the key issues relevant to the design and implementation of a viable quality assurance system for Belizean higher education.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore quality assurance practices and perspectives within Belizean higher education institutions.

Research Questions

The central question addressed in this research was “How is quality assurance perceived and practiced within Belize’s higher education institutions?” Sub-questions addressed by the study were:

1. How is higher education quality conceptualized in Belize’s higher education institutions?
2. How do Belizean institutions currently assure (assess, monitor, improve) quality?
3. How do academic leaders regard the proposed implementation of an external quality assurance system?
4. What implications do these conceptual and contextual issues have for the quality assurance system proposed by the National Accreditation Council of Belize Act?

Summary of Method

The qualitative study used a collective case study approach. Multiple sites (individual cases/institutions) were studied to gain insight into the larger case which is the higher education system of Belize. The higher education system is comprised of 12 local higher education institutions (ten junior colleges, one national public university, and one private university). The system also includes two offshore medical colleges, an extension department of the University of the West Indies (UWI), two distance doctoral

programs in education from U.S. universities and a few technical and vocational institutions with a limited number of Associate's degree-level programs. These additional institutions and programs account for less than 10% of total tertiary enrollment and were not included in the study.

Due to the relatively small size and diversity of local institutions in terms of communities served, academic focus, and management, the researcher set out to include all twelve local institutions in the study. At the time of the study, of the ten junior colleges, five had fewer than 300 students; enrollments in four other junior colleges and the private university ranged between 300 and 600 students; the largest junior college had approximately 1,200 students; and the national public university had approximately 4,000 students. Only four of the twelve institutions existed prior to 1999; however, the national public university, was formed in 2000 through the amalgamation of four pre-existing Associate's degree-level government institutions (the Bliss School of Nursing, the Belize College of Agriculture, the Belize Teacher's College, and the Belize Technical College) and the University College of Belize (est. 1984).

The absence of a higher education coordinating body and regulations to guide the sector's development resulted in significant variations in curriculum, academic policies, and practices among institutions. At the time of the study, several junior colleges had a professional/technical focus, while others were more comprehensive community college-type institutions. They all offered Associate's degree programs of varying credits and requirements. The national university offered both Associate's and Bachelor's degrees. The private for-profit institution, established in 2003, offered both undergraduate and

graduate degrees, some of which were through a joint-degree partnership with a university in the United States.

At the time of the study, five of the junior colleges were being managed by religious denominations, three were being managed by local communities, and two were government-owned and managed. Those that were not government-owned were classified as grant-aided, being neither fully public nor fully private, and receiving a large portion of their funding from government in the form of salary grants and student financial aid. Three junior colleges were being led by presidents, two of whom also functioned as principals of affiliated high schools, while the remaining colleges were being led by deans who reported directly to their governing boards.

The study used the following strategies to generate data on the perceptions of academic leaders and institutional quality assurance practices:

1. Formal in-depth interviews with seventeen participants from the junior college and university subsectors. Participants were all senior administrators such as deans, quality assurance officers, provosts and presidents;
2. Analysis of documents related to institutional policies and practices. These documents included (a) faculty, staff, and student handbooks; (b) guidelines for program review, faculty evaluation, and development, and student learning assessment; and (c) self-study instruments.
3. On-site Visits. The researcher visited each site to get a sense of the physical, social, and cultural contexts in which the institutions were operating.

Definition of Terms

One of the primary aims of the research was to allow participants to generate their own meanings to the central concepts of the study—quality and quality assurance—and so a constructivist approach was used; however, it was necessary to begin with the following definitions in order to frame the study and avoid ambiguity in understanding:

1. Academic leader- senior persons, such as deans, provosts and presidents, with academic and administrative responsibilities at a local junior college or university in Belize.
2. Higher education- used synonymously with tertiary education, refers to educational institutions and programs at the Associate's degree level or higher.

The following three definitions were derived from UNESCO's International Institute for Educational Planning ([IIEP], 2007a):

3. Quality assurance- "relates to a continuous process of evaluating (assessing, monitoring, guaranteeing, maintaining, and improving) the quality of a higher education system, institutions or programs" (p. 17).
4. Internal quality assurance – "refers to each institution's or programme's policies and mechanisms for ensuring that it is fulfilling its own purposes as well as the standards that apply to higher education in general or to the profession or discipline in particular" (p. 16).
5. External quality assurance-"refers to the actions of an external body which may be a quality assurance agency or another body different from the institution, which assesses its operation or that of its programmes in order to

determine whether it is meeting the standards that have been agreed on” (p. 16).

Assumptions

The researcher assumed that academic leaders are in a good position to answer questions regarding quality assurance because of their unique roles in policy-making both at the institutional and national levels. Academic leaders typically interact with faculty, students, the general public, and other administrators and they deal with a wide range of issues including curricular, financial, and policy matters. In many cases, they are responsible for developing policies, evaluating faculty, and determining institutional practices.

The academic leaders that were selected for this study also represent their institutions in the Association of Tertiary Level Institutions in Belize (ATLIB). ATLIB, which is the body legally recognized by the Ministry of Education as representative of the country’s higher education sector, regularly deals with educational issues at the national level. It was assumed that the academic leaders’ professional experiences leading institutions, their interactions with various stakeholders, and their exposure to national issues would provide them with a range and depth of experience and knowledge which render their perspectives worthy of consideration and potentially valuable to the process of developing and implementing a quality assurance system.

Additionally, it was assumed that the researcher’s positive working relationship with the participants and familiarity with the system would be a benefit, rather than an impediment, to the study. The researcher has over eighteen years of work experience in the Belizean higher education sector—ten years as a teacher and eight years as an

administrator. The researcher was a dean at a local junior college and represented her institution in ATLIB prior to taking leave to pursue doctoral studies. As a result, the researcher knew most of the potential participants and had developed a positive and collegial working relationship with them.

Although there may be a natural apprehension to share some institutional documents and information with a colleague from another institution, the research focused on non-confidential documents such as manuals, guidelines, and instruments which are normally distributed widely within the institution or to external stakeholders. It was made clear that the objective of the study was not to assess the quality of institutions but rather to identify current quality assurance practices, as well as to report on system-wide challenges to quality assurance.

Several measures were adopted to generate professional trust beyond that which the researcher believed was already present between her and those participants with whom she had worked. For example, the researcher adopted a non-intrusive stance and allowed participants to share as they felt comfortable. Participants were assured that potentially sensitive information would be aggregated or anonymously reported and were guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality. Participants also were afforded the opportunity to review and provide feedback on transcripts of interviews, preliminary findings, and personal quotes to be included in the final report of the study. Additionally, to add legitimacy to the study and to encourage use of the results for planning and policy-making, endorsements from both the Ministry of Education and ATLIB were obtained.

Delimitations

The study was designed as a collective (multi-site) case study within the boundaries of the local Belizean higher education system; thus, the results of this study are only generalizable to the Belizean context and its unique political, socio-economic, and cultural realities. Furthermore, only academic administrators at the level of dean, provost, or president and persons directly involved in quality assurance activities or initiatives were included in the population studied. Participation of other key stakeholder groups within institutions such as faculty, students, and staff was not sought. Similarly, the study did not address perspectives from stakeholders such as the Ministry of Education and other public and private sector stakeholders.

The study also excluded a growing, but informal, portion of the higher education sector not currently under the umbrella of ATLIB. These are the off-shore medical universities and transnational programs. The researcher recognized that the perspectives of academic leaders and local tertiary institutions may differ from those of other stakeholders and subsectors; however, inclusion of these additional entities were beyond the scope of the study and would have required additional time and resources which were not available to the researcher.

Limitations

Merriam (1998) states that “case study offers a means of investigating complex social units consisting of multiple variables of potential importance in understanding the phenomenon” (p. 41). Thus, case study was a good choice for this particular research topic. Nonetheless, there are inherent limitations in case studies and qualitative research designs in general. These are outlined below:

1. First and foremost, in research designs in which the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, results are dependent on the “sensitivity and integrity” of the researcher and there is the potential for bias in selecting and presenting data (Merriam, 1998, p. 42).
2. Reliance on interviews is another limitation since the accuracy of the results depends greatly on the participants’ willingness to provide the requested information and ability to communicate what it is that they perceive. Likewise, the methodology relies greatly on the researcher’s ability to understand and interpret the meaning of the participants’ communication.
3. Reliance on documentation to understand institutional processes is another limitation since documents may describe policies or practices which are outdated or not implemented as written.
4. Case studies also are limited in that they do not fit into the traditional understanding of reliability (replication by other researchers), validity (determining *truth*) and generalizability (applicability to a larger population).

To minimize these limitations, the researcher committed to the highest level of integrity in the collection, analysis, and reporting of results. The researcher prepared for the study by gaining experience in conducting interviews and reviewing institutional documents on related topics (Villanueva, 2010a; 2010b). Additionally, the research design addressed several issues related to validity and reliability; these will be explained in the methodology section of the report.