

Higher Education in the 21st Century: The Iron Triangle's Critical Angle of Quality Assurance



The 2nd Lecture in the Dennis Irvine Lecture Series

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Introduction

Good afternoon!

I am immensely delighted to be here today. My thanks to the University Council of Jamaica for the kind invitation. It is an honour to deliver the 2nd Lecture in the Dennis Irvine Lecture Series as part of UCJ's Quality Assurance in Tertiary Education Week 2008.

I did not have the privilege of knowing Dr. Dennis Irvine. But I know of his tremendous contribution to education in the Caribbean, in the Commonwealth and around the globe. Dr. Irvine served as Vice-Chancellor of the University of Guyana for 13 years. He was UNESCO's Science Adviser to the Caribbean. And he was Education Consultant to the Jamaican Government.

My colleagues at the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) remember Dr Irvine fondly. He was Director of Caribbean Programmes and then Director of Materials Acquisition and Development from COL's inception in 1989 until 1994. He returned to Jamaica upon his retirement but continued to assist COL as Co-ordinator of Programmes in the Caribbean and then as Regional Adviser to COL's President.

I note with particular interest, from last year's Dennis Irvine Memorial Lecture delivered by our President, Sir John Daniel, at the University of Guyana, that Dr Irvine began his career at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria as both a lecturer, a professor of chemistry and faculty dean. I lived in Ibadan for 13 years, including the last six years (1963-69) of Dr Irvine's 15-year stay in Ibadan. But our paths never crossed. Nonetheless, as a Nigerian (I hold both Nigerian and Canadian citizenships), I'm singularly honoured to be giving this Lecture in his memory and want to take this opportunity, on behalf of myself and all Nigerians, to express our profound gratitude for Dr Irvine's contributions to building Nigeria's oldest university, the University of Ibadan.

Dr. Irvine also served as a consultant to many national and international agencies, including UNESCO, United Nations agencies, the Caribbean Examinations Council and the Government of Jamaica. He was named an Honorary Fellow of COL in 2002 and was elected founding president of the CARADOL - the Caribbean Regional Association for Distance and Open Learning - in 2005.

And of course Dr. Irvine served as the chairman of the University Council of Jamaica for 11 years.

When COL's former President, Professor Raj Dhanarajan, gave the first Dennis Irvine Lecture at the University of Guyana, he said this about the man: "We are constantly amazed at the erudition, energy and passion he brings to the things he does and through his powers of argument, persuasion and clever diplomacy..."

It is an honour to give this lecture in memory of such a man and someone who made such a contribution to education and development in the Caribbean.

I come here today from Canada where COL is based but I am no stranger to Jamaica. For two intensive years, until August 2006, I was here with the High Commission for Canada as Head of its Development Cooperation Section. My time here gave me a unique opportunity to appreciate and understand this Island's distinct charm and challenges. So I'm grateful to be invited back to this beautiful country, Jamaica - land we love.

Structure of this lecture

I'm here today to talk about quality in higher education in keeping with the theme of Quality Assurance Week, "Promoting Quality in Tertiary Education through Leadership."

I'm going to tell you a bit about the Commonwealth of Learning and our activities around the Commonwealth, and specifically in Jamaica. I will touch on some of the trends in higher education in the 21st century and the challenges this is causing. We'll look at the Iron Triangle of higher education, and the elements of Access, Quality and Cost. Then we'll focus on quality - why it's so important in higher education, how it's achieved and how it's measured.

One of the ways quality is assessed is the institutional audit. I will tell you about COL's recent experience with institutional audits, what we learned and how we are moving forward.

Quality can be a slippery concept to manage. My goal is to help you understand why quality is a critical angle of the Iron Triangle, and why we must pay attention to quality in higher education.

COL's work

Most of you will be familiar with the Commonwealth of Learning. COL is an intergovernmental organisation created by Commonwealth Heads of Government to encourage the development and sharing of open learning/distance education knowledge, resources and technologies. COL helps developing nations improve access to quality education and training.

Our work is based on the belief that access to learning is the key to development. Indeed, *Learning for Development* is the theme of our current Three-year Strategic Plan, 2006-2009. The plan addresses an agenda that includes the UN's Millennium Development Goals, the goals of Education for All and the Commonwealth's objectives of peace, democracy, equality and good governance.

We are focused on three areas of activity:

- *Education*
COL helps countries increase access to education of quality at all levels by focusing on quality assurance, teacher development, alternative forms of schooling, new approaches to higher education and the creation of expertise in eLearning.
- *Learning for Livelihoods*
COL helps countries to identify where livelihoods can be improved, and to create matching learning opportunities.
- *Human Environment*
COL helps countries use learning technologies to make a difference in the areas of gender, health, environment and governance. We also advise on the educational use of media and information and communications technologies (ICTs).

We have been involved in several initiatives in the Caribbean recently:

- COL helped with the establishment of the new Open School in Trinidad & Tobago, which just opened a few months ago.
- We assisted with the creation of CARADOL - the Caribbean Regional Association for Distance and Open Learning.
- A number of educators from Caribbean states have taken part in training by COL to develop learning materials for the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth. Caribbean educators will be able to access the Virtual University's learning materials free of charge.

- COL has helped several organisations and government departments set up media units so they can produce videos, radio programmes or TV shows for education about health issues and improved methods for agriculture.
- Each year we sponsor a meeting of the Caribbean's Chief Education Officers

COL also has many ties here in Jamaica:

- In 2006, we hosted our biennial conference, the 4th Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning, in Ocho Rios, in partnership with the University of the West Indies' Distance Education Centre. More than 500 people came from around the world, and we were wonderfully hosted.
- The Acting Chair of our Board of Governors is His Excellency Burchell Whiteman, who is your former Minister of Education and currently the Jamaican Higher Commissioner to London.
- The University College of the Caribbean just enrolled its first cohort of students in COL's Commonwealth Executive Master of Business Administration programme.
- COL frequently hosts workshops in Jamaica to build capacity in teacher training, the development of learning materials and using mass media for learning.
- COL worked with the University of Technology to develop a Special Diploma Programme in Technical and Vocational Training.

So you can see that we are committed to working with partners in this region to embrace learning for development.

Higher Education in the 21st Century

In my job at COL, I focus on Higher Education. Let's look at some of the trends in higher education in the 21st century.

First of all, the demand for education beyond high school is expanding rapidly. Between 1960 and 2004, enrolment in higher education jumped tenfold from 13 million students to 132 million students. The number of higher education institutions has also exploded. During the same time period, 1960 to 2004, the number of higher education institutions in Latin America increased from 164 to 7,500.

Consider also that the majority of people in the developing Commonwealth are under the age of 20. By the year 2020, 40% of the global workforce will be knowledge workers, with a need for higher education. The World Bank says that for countries to achieve sustainable economic development, the Age Participation Rates in higher education must be in the region of 40 to 50%. While many developed countries have achieved this, in many developing countries, the Age Participation Rates are less than 10%. This is an enormous challenge that we face.

How will we meet this challenge? Certainly not by building more and more traditional colleges and universities. This is simply not economically feasible. The alternative is to establish systems that are not

critically dependent on traditional physical infrastructure. This points to open and distance learning. Increasingly, we will see campus-based systems working together with ODL systems to meet the rising demand for higher education.

So that's another trend in higher education, an increase in distance learning. Let's look at one facet of distance learning, open universities. In 1988, there were 10 open universities in the Commonwealth. Less than 20 years later, there were 23 open universities. One of them, the Indira Gandhi National Open University in India, serves 1.2 million students. This is tremendous growth.

Another significant trend in higher education is that the role of the state has decreased and the role of the market has become more important. This could have an impact on quality assurance and the social commitment of universities; it may also increase choice and access in higher education.

Globalisation is also affecting higher education. There is much more cross-border higher education - institutions in one country providing education to students in other countries. This can be cause for concern in terms of quality assurance. And here in Jamaica, you have plenty of experience with the "brain drain" - students who gain their post-secondary education in other countries and don't return home or to the Caribbean. COL has participated in research studies on this phenomenon.

Developing countries are at a significant disadvantage in the globalised academic system. Yet, higher education is vitally important for developing countries. Higher education makes a significant contribution to national economic growth and development. It provides jobs, educates the future workforce, develops future leaders, and enriches society. Developing countries will benefit hugely as access to higher education increases. This brings me to the iron triangle.

The Iron Triangle

In this rapidly changing environment, there is increasing pressure to achieve quality in higher education.

The challenge that has always faced those who want to expand education is to achieve a balance between three objectives. The first is to make education accessible to as many as possible. The second is to ensure that the quality of the education provided is worthwhile. The third is to do this at a reasonable cost. The triangle is made up of these three vectors: access, quality and cost.

We call it the iron triangle because it explains why it is taking the world so long to achieve education for all. For some reason, we instinctively link quality and exclusivity. There is an assumption that access to good education must always be limited because of cost. For this reason, entry is restricted through examinations and other barriers. The final step is that those barriers become the surrogate for quality. We assume that an educational institution must be good if it is difficult to get into, regardless of what actually happens to students once they are admitted.

Once the linkage between quality and exclusivity has been made, it is only a small step to assume that a quality education for all is a hopeless delusion. But the growing use of technology in education has turned

this assumption on its ear. With open and distance learning, you can provide broad access to a quality education at a relatively low cost. This is an enormously important development.

I refer to quality as the critical angle of the Iron Triangle to express the urgency I feel about assuring quality in higher education. We have a big job ahead of us as the demand for higher education grows. Open and distance learning holds out tremendous promise. But we absolutely must assure quality in higher education. And that is not a simple matter.

Let's take a moment to define quality. In the context of higher education, quality refers to the means by which an institution can guarantee with certainty that the standards and quality of its educational provision are being maintained and enhanced.

Quality can be seen to consist of three elements:

- Core dimension: study materials, instructional design, learner support and assessment, research.
- Systemic dimension: state policy, participatory governance, institutional leadership /management, planning.
- Resource dimension: academic/technical expertise, learning resources, networking, ICTs.

Assessing Quality

There is no single accepted approach to quality control. Some countries support the development of internationally accepted standards of quality while others feel this responsibility should be left to national institutions.

One way to ensure accountability in higher education is through performance indicators, an approach that is used widely in the United States and other Western countries. An educational institution's operations are measured against stipulated standards and are used for a variety of purposes: measuring the efficiency and effectiveness of an institution, providing a basis for international comparison of educational quality, student learning outcomes, assessing relative performance of teachers and even in relating institutional outputs to inputs. These result in centralized control and academics have been known to resist imposition from outside forces because they believe they are better judges of educational quality.

However, as policymakers and researchers debate the usefulness, or lack thereof, of measuring the unmeasurable, the literature indicates that the increasing use of peer reviews and quality audits is tending toward relegating performance indicators to the role of a supportive tool.

There are also many national and regional quality assurance agencies to monitor quality in higher education. For instance, the Higher Education Quality Committee of South Africa's Council for Higher Education regularly conducts audits and regularly closes programmes that do not meet its standards. One of the institutional audits I will discuss in a few moments was aimed at helping Unisa prepare for an audit by the Higher Education Quality Committee.

International organisations are collaborating to develop quality guidelines. In 2005, UNESCO and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development published joint guidelines on Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education. These guidelines advise institutions to develop internal quality management systems that incorporate input from students, academic staff and administrators.

Institutional Audits

The approach I'd like to focus on today is institutional audits. Most national quality assurance agencies conduct quality audits of higher education institutions in their jurisdictions. Sometimes the audits are carried out on the initiative of universities themselves. Why would they do this? Two reasons. It could be because they're preparing for a future audit by the national QA agency. Or it could be as a catalyst for reform.

COL recently led two institutional audits. The first, for the University of South Africa, or Unisa, was in preparation for an upcoming audit by South Africa's Higher Education Quality Committee. The second, for the University of Ghana, was part of a process of reform. The audit was intended to help the institution recover from problems stemming from an excessive increase in student numbers and a major breakdown in examination security but also to help it chart a path for the future.

A bit of background here: at the behest of the donor agencies in the 1990's, higher education in many parts of the developing world took a beating as resources were heavily deployed in favour of basic education, particularly at the primary school level. Higher education institutions in countries that were under military rule, as Ghana was for a number of years, were already starved of resources to near extinction. The quality of higher education suffered badly, so much so that institutions that were once highly respected internationally for their rigour and quality were now prime suspects in, and perceived to be, churning out barely literate graduates.

The good news is that there is now a renewed focus by governments and higher education institutions themselves on re-energising and revitalising higher education to meet the growing need of mass higher education and, importantly, national development goals and objectives. Increasingly, higher education institutions are recognising the imperative of ensuring quality while making access a priority. It is likely, therefore, that in future we will be seeing more invitational institutional quality audits.

Let's look at the three phases of the institutional audit process and the lessons that we have drawn from them.

Pre-Audit Phase

Before the actual audit takes place, several steps are required to ensure that the resulting audit is successful. The need for the audit, who should conduct it and for what reasons should be clearly outlined. The project must be fully embraced by the head of the institution and its senior management, and it must be communicated to the rank and file members of the institution.

The second step is to designate a unit to coordinate and oversee the audit process. This could be a Quality Assurance unit if one exists, or a strategic planning unit.

Using set procedures, various operational and academic units need to conduct self-assessments. This should not be what we call a *happiness dance*. It must be an open and frank detailing of a unit's mandate, goals and objectives, what it actually does and has accomplished against stated objectives, resources available to it, its plans and aspirations for the future, and what its major challenges are.

Such assessments can throw up some surprising gaps. At the University of Ghana, for example, some departments reported that they had "no idea how many students they had." These self-assessments are then synthesised and produced in a binder or book form for the auditors.

In self-assessing, the more reflective, analytical, evaluative and self-critical an institution is, as opposed to being defensive and merely descriptive in a self-serving manner, the more productive the audit is likely to be. It also could save time and money as the auditors do not spend more time than is necessary chasing after one detail or the other. In this respect, the Unisa self-assessments were painfully frank and, needless to say, very helpful.

Selection of the audit team is very important. It could be done by the *host* institution or by a trusted outside body. The composition of the audit team depends on the range of activities that it is being called upon to examine, and the knowledge, skills and experiences required to cover the audit scope.

Getting highly experienced people to conduct the audit does help to cut down the costs that are associated with training. It helps if some of the external members already have some familiarity with the country and the institution. By including members with experience of higher education in a range of universities and even in a number of countries, you will avoid the risk of having an audit team that proposes solutions from a single foreign institution. Finally, the team must be able to function and work as a team, led by a chairperson who is capable of maintaining focus and *discipline* at all times.

Next come the briefing sessions. In the Unisa case, the audit team met and were briefed over a day and a half by the host institution at a *central* location - in Cambridge, England - with team members coming from Canada, France, Hong Kong, India, Nigeria, South Africa and the UK. Prior to assembling in Cambridge, the team members had been provided with a formidable array of documentation - via e-mail and in hard copies in two hefty binder volumes - on everything from the university's strategic plan to policies and audit guidelines; policies covering tuition, assessment, research, e-communications, HIV/AIDS.

The pre-audit briefing was useful in two respects: it helped to build a team spirit among the audit team members, some of whom were meeting the others for the first time, and it afforded them the opportunity to ask questions and receive answers in real time. However, in retrospect, we feel that savings could have been had if we had dispensed with the briefing meeting in Cambridge and conducted what needed to be communicated by e-mail and by faxes and teleconferencing when/if necessary. The team could also have met at the field site a day or two before the audit began to clarify any matters that needed to be clarified. If a field site briefing is not possible, the briefing should be conducted as suggested no more than 3-4 weeks before the audit begins; the time lag between the Unisa briefing in March and the audit in June was

too long.

The University of Ghana team had no prior briefing meeting, but had the advantage of making two week-long visits to Ghana at an interval of four months. Much of the first week was spent on visiting parts of the institution, meeting staff and launching the self-assessment process. The second visit focused on developing analyses and recommendations and testing them on key stakeholders such as the deans and the University Council.

The audit teams for the two institutional audits were large: 11 members for the University of Ghana audit and 9 for Unisa's. In hindsight, and in the perspective of using this mechanism more widely, these numbers are too large to be really cost-effective. Some four or five people, carefully selected, with a well-defined audit scope, would normally be sufficient to accomplish the task at a lower cost.

The Audit Phase

The Unisa trial audit was held over five working days at the university's main campus. A building complex was dedicated to the audit and Unisa's strategic planning office set up a temporary office. Meals and refreshments were provided on site. A *war room* was set aside for the audit team to deliberate in confidence.

The audit team had a heap of material to go through and put in 15-hour days. Even then, there was not enough time to properly sift through all the documentation and supporting material to conduct proper audit trails. Their work would have been eased considerably if they had prepared questions in advance - at least to cover the first day of the audit interviews.

Then, there's the issue of sheer numbers. The team interviewed over 400 unduplicated interviewees, ranging from Alumni to Council members. While this may seem overwhelming, it is essential preparation for Unisa.

One way to avoid large numbers of interviewees is to rely more on selected audit trails than on documented portfolios of evidence or self-assessments. If this is properly done, the audit team may not need to see a particular group of interviewees. Experience has shown that this approach could lead to a reduction in costs by as much as 50%.

The team visiting the University of Ghana divided itself into three sub-groups, reflecting the areas of review requested by the University:

- Governance, Management and Administration,
- Academic Operations, and
- Infrastructure and Resources.

This worked very well both by allowing the team to multiply its efforts and by giving team members specific tasks to get their teeth into. The full group met every day, at least over lunch and usually in plenary sessions to compare notes.

The Post-Audit Phase

Immediately following the audit, it is useful to hold a debriefing meeting with the Vice-Chancellor and their team of senior executives to provide them with a high level summary of the audit team's findings. This gives the University's senior management an opportunity to share with the team their preliminary response to the findings before the team disperses.

For the institution just audited to maintain momentum in the post-audit period, it is important that the audit report, written according to an agreed or prescribed format, be issued within 9 to 10 weeks of the completion of the audit. This has the merit of allowing all those directly engaged in the audit process to remain focused and to follow up on the areas recommended for improvements. In an environment in which senior management is highly committed to change or reform, as was our experience with Unisa, action can be taken to effect improvements even before the final draft of the report is issued.

Rather than having every team member write bits and pieces of the report, it is advisable that one person be designated to do the writing, particularly in producing the first draft. For the Unisa audit report, this function was performed by the chairperson of the audit team who maintained an overall perspective on the audit process. The same approach was used by the Ghana team.

There may be issues that need follow-up and it is wise for an institution, as a contingency measure, to make financial provision for special additional visits. In our Ghana experience, this approach was instrumental in getting external specialist help in sorting out the finances of the University.

Learning from Institutional Audits

Invitational institutional audits can indeed make a cost-effective contribution to quality enhancement at the levels of governance, management and program delivery. Our experience has led us to conclude that the following major considerations are helpful in making cost-effective decisions:

- The larger an audit team is, the higher the cost of the audit is likely to be. A team size of about 5 people, composed of experienced local and international experts, is sufficient to conduct a successful audit. Although the teams for both the Unisa and University of Ghana audits were quite large, they came with very impressive credentials.
- Pre-audit briefings of an audit team are less expensive when conducted electronically or undertaken just prior to the start of the audit.
- Wherever possible, use existing documentation when providing documentation for an audit. If an audit teams demands documentation that is not readily available, it could be costly for the institution.
- Reflective, analytical and self-critical assessments lead to more productive audits, and they save money.
- Self-assessments can be used for both internal quality assurance and external accreditation processes, which will also save money.

- Housing the audit operation in a dedicated office complex for the entire duration of the audit is very cost-effective.
- Institutional audits can be helpful in uncovering significant issues of governance and management, which, if left unattended, could become even more costly for the institution. Committed leadership is required here to implement needed changes.
- For institutions just starting out on their QA journey, institutional audits stimulate and enhance the basis for on-going QA structures and processes.

These audits provided useful guidance, but their direct and indirect costs were considerable because they involved large international teams of experts. The total cost was at least \$100,000 in out-of-pocket expenses and many hours of institutional staff time.

This kind of cost is beyond the budget of many higher education institutions. So how can such audits be made more cost-effective whilst retaining their credibility? We have four suggestions:

1. First, most QA agencies require self-assessments to be conducted prior to audit visits using set procedures. These should also be carried out before invitational audits under procedures agreed by the institution and its audit team. These self-assessments should include any student or graduate survey data. Where self-assessment is a novel experience, this process has the additional benefit of providing a basis for ongoing QA structures and processes.
2. Second, the institutional authorities (Vice-Chancellor/President; Governing Board Chair) must be committed to the audit. The audit team must understand the context for reform and any major national or institutional constraints. The institution should make experienced staff available as a secretariat for the audit team.
3. Third, an invitational audit will likely highlight significant issues of governance. Audit teams must be equipped to analyse them, and institutional leadership must be ready to address them.
4. Fourth, in inviting members to join the audit team, the institution must choose both local and international figures likely to be perceived within the institution as both credible and objective. The team should include (or be able to call on) expertise in academic programmes, governance & management, and infrastructure & resources.

If this model is followed, it should be possible to conduct a cost-effective audit on the basis of a visit of a week or less by a team of not more than six members. There are two advantages of having the study done by a group. First, there's the potential for credibility within the university community and government if panel members are respected figures. Second, the group can have an impact by splitting up and visiting widely within the institution. It also helps if the university authorities signal their strong commitment to the process and give the panel an opportunity to present its findings publicly. We believe that had either the UNISA or the University of Ghana reports been produced by individual consultants they would have

had minimal impact for reform, even if the content of the reports had been exactly the same as those the panels produced.

But getting back to the issue of cost, we are looking at ways to make quality audits more feasible for institutions on a tight budget. One option that we are now working on is the development of a higher education toolkit that would enable an institution to undertake an audit at reasonable cost.

Conclusion

I hope you have gained some insight today into some of the challenges faced by higher education, especially when it comes to quality assurance. The higher education landscape is changing rapidly in the 21st century, driven by increased demand, a proliferation of diverse higher education institutions (including more private providers, more open universities and more cross-border education) and globalization. At the same time, the need for higher education is greater than ever, especially in developing countries.

Some of the challenges faced by higher education include increasing Age Participation Rates, stemming the brain drain and of course, assuring quality.

I explained the Iron Triangle and its three angles: access, quality and cost. I refer to quality as "the critical angle" of the Iron Triangle, because without it, higher education will not accomplish what is required.

We looked at some different approaches to quality assurance in higher education, including internationally developed guidelines, national and regional agencies, and performance indicators.

Then we looked in-depth at institutional audits, focusing on COL's experience conducting audits for Unisa and the University of Ghana last year. There's a lot to learn from the pre-audit phase, the audit itself and the post-audit period. In particular, we addressed the challenge of minimising the cost of these audits.

I will conclude by encouraging you to be vigilant about quality in higher education. It is especially important here in the Caribbean because of the benefits of keeping your educated citizens here at home, rather than losing them to the knowledge Diaspora.

I will also point out that as chairman of UCJ, Dr Dennis Irvine worked hard to support your mission, to increase the availability of university level training in Jamaica. You can continue this work by focusing on the critical leg of the iron triangle, quality.

Thank you.

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