Managing both Quality and Access at

Higher Educational Institutions in Tobago

by

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Abstract

This paper will focus on the island of Tobago and indicate what practical solutions are best suited for administrators to manage quality and access at higher educational institutions on the island. The key areas to managing quality identified are the inclusiveness of a quality plan, administrators desire to see quality as an institutional culture and consideration of the cost of staff's attitude to the institution whilst not ignoring the impact the physical environment has on the senses and the significant role it plays in quality standards on campus. Tobago also presents its own features in managing access to higher educational institutions on the island. The distance and rural feature of the island is significant in that it places some local communities at a disadvantage. Higher education needs to be more accessible to men and persons with disabilities whilst also focusing on key programmes which will meet the demands of the labour market and foster development of Tobago and its people.

Introduction

The paper will aim to bring to the fore practical ways in which administrators can manage both quality and access at higher educational institutions on the island of Tobago. For the purpose of this paper quality will be discussed first followed by managing access to higher education. Tobago is located northeast of Trinidad and is the smaller of the islands making up the republic of Trinidad and Tobago. Tobago has a land area of 300 square kilometres, and is approximately 42 kilometres long and 10 kilometres wide. The population is 54,084 as indicated by the Central Statistical Office (2000). The capital is Scarborough, chief town and administrative centre of Tobago and is located 13km from Tobago's southwestern tip (Scarborough, Encyclopaedia Britannica 2011), which has a population of about 17,000. A main economic force specific to the island is tourism, which is much more concentrated in the southwest of the island. Most of the higher educational campuses on the island at present are located in or around the vicinity of the town of Scarborough.

Goetsch and Davis (1995, p. 3) defined quality as "a dynamic state associated with products, services, people, processes, and environments that meet or exceed current expectations." Therefore, this implies that quality is not stagnant, administrators must have a vision, know their responsibilities and recognise any changes within their institutions in order to successfully manage both quality and access. According to the Accreditation Council of Trinidad and Tobago (http://www.actt.org.tt), it states that one of its responsibilities is to

register tertiary education institutions who have been evaluated and found to meet or exceed stated internationally acceptable criteria for educational quality by considering the holistic characteristics of the institution and evaluating the organizational capacity to deliver quality educational programmes. Therefore, higher educational institutions in Tobago are of no exception and have a mandate to deliver total quality. Green, (1994) stated that higher educational institutions are of a high quality when their mission is clear and they can meet their goals efficiently and effectively.

Managing Quality:

Working together

Evans and Lindsay (2008) found that while many institutions of higher education have made quality improvement efforts, there is only a small number who are actually measuring and improving quality. Therefore, the institution's ability to see its strengths and weaknesses and come up with practical solutions to improve standards and deliver quality is of high importance if it is to demonstrate continued growth and development.

Administrators are to ensure that there is a robust quality management plan in place and encourage collaboration and communication, sometimes however academics are placed on the front burner and priority given to it but consideration must also be given to the physical environment, quality of student experience, staff attitudes and off course satisfaction levels. This would in an ideal situation signify an all embracing or total plan for managing quality. To manage quality it must be inclusive, students, faculty and staff must understand what quality means and what is required of them. They must be made to feel as a part of the process for it to work efficiently and be effective. Institutions which have high standards and are functioning well understands team work, it is not about the strongest member on the team but much more about how each member of the team work together to get the job done successfully, therefore, all institutional members are to support each other to deliver quality goods and services. Detert, Kopel, Mauriel, and Jenni (2000) suggested that without the administrators support, commitment and example, quality management will not be effective. According to Peters (1987) quality programmes may fail if there is a system but there is no passion to see it deliver or there is passion but no system in place. Those involved in the quality processes must be aware that "No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main (Donne 1623). Therefore, they must understand the damage that can occur when individuals or teams are not part of the process and be

determined to work together, coupled with good communication amongst individuals or institutional groups to provide the necessary information and data to enable informed decisions and a way forward in enhancing institutional quality.

Institutional culture

Tierney and Minor (2004) states that quality comes about not because higher education has designed the best governance system but because the participants in the organization are able to effectively interpret the culture of the organization. Administrators may want to see quality as an institutional culture and may want to force quality practices and principles but one must recognize according to Demming (1993) that fear does not motivate people. Sometimes workers try to avoid being blamed for any inefficiency in the system, by refusing to report quality problems. However, Demming continued that "The worker is not the problem" simply to say that management has a responsibility to ensure that those involved are quite clear on what is required of them as part of the system, because if they are to maintain quality they must understand what is the goal of the system or what one intends to achieve and decide how best they can use their energies in the whole process.

Mahoney (1997) found that "Successful leaders are able to commit people to action." Thereby, indicating that administrators can be the driving force to promote an ideal environment one where there is commitment, trust, shared vision and a purpose. It is imperative that everyone is made to feel valued and a part of the process in maintaining quality standards in the organisation.

The physical environment

Kotler, (1973) said that the customer behaviour, feelings and thoughts are influenced by the stimulation they receive from the physical environment. If one enters a campus for the first time, in most cases the senses play a pivotal role in ones perception, indicating the level of importance that quality has as factor in the life of the institution. What the student or customer, see, hear, feel, touch even smell leave lasting impressions. Administrators can easily ignore the physical environment in light of other campus needs but the aesthetics of the environment is as important as any other needs on campus, in that it influences ones view on the quality standards of the campus. According to Doyle (1998) it is important for the institution to have real evidence that indicate a high level of quality. Therefore those

entrusted in providing higher education should not ignore the importance of having the most suitable environment whether it is inside the building or outside.

Sharma and Stafford (2000) implied that the nicer the environment appeared then customers perceived that the service was better. The lighting, temperatures that are: heat because of our climate or cold as air-condition units can be set at uncomfortable temperatures, choice of colours, noise or disturbances and gardens may all seem insignificant but they are key determinants in ensuring a comfortable environment. Even the provision of furniture, equipment, laboratories, cafeterias and stocked libraries are also essential elements that impact upon the senses and suggest that quality exists. The physical environment is an excellent advertising and invitational tool for showcasing quality at the institution.

Staff Attitudes

Administrators are to be aware of the attitudes of their staff which like the physical environment give a real or perceived indication of quality at the institution. Ajzen (1991) suggested that one can envisage the behaviour that will be associated with staff's attitude that is, if staff attitude is negative then it would be unwise to expect the delivery of quality service. Gonzalez and Garazo (2006) believes that it is the organisational strategies and practices which affect staff attitudes and behaviours therefore one should be aware of the factors which would bring about certain attitudes and in effect certain behaviours that would be directed towards the customer and the institution. Positive attitudes would involve friendliness, professionalism, team spirit, loyalty and commitment to the institution.

Training is at the heart of quality management (Detert et al. 2000). It should be centred on the importance of listening and responding to the customer's requests therefore, resources should be set aside for training and reinforcement. Thompson (2006) said that the customer will have a better experience from persons who are properly trained. A motivated, well-trained member of staff will attribute more value to their role within the institution, which in turn transfers into the quality of work presented. Quality service provides benefits to the customer as well as to the reputation of the institution. With this in mind one cannot ignore the impact of staff attitudes when managing quality within the institution.

Managing Access:

'Access and participation in higher education are essential for the empowerment of all, especially those often excluded' (International Association of Universities, 2008). Access to higher education may seem fair in our society due to the fact that tuition cost had been significantly reduced due to governmental initiatives, and the proliferation of educational institutions however the question arises as to whether persons with the same academic ability but having different demographic structure or some measure of physical disability have the same opportunity of accessing training programmes at higher educational institutions on the island. Administrators need to be aware of the areas that impact on access to their institutions, the pertinent areas to be taken into consideration in the context of Tobago include, but are not limited to the development of programmes, the male factor and persons with disabilities, and the distance and the rural feature.

Programme development

With the anticipation of the delivery of a new state of the art hospital on the island it would be wise to expand or develop programmes to include, training for medical, nursing and ancillary staff in areas such medicine, specialised nursing, ultrasonography and radiotherapy to name a few. While citizens may meet the requirements for entry into these programmes the lack of opportunity to enter such a program on the island places them at a disadvantage. Sometimes persons who wish to further their education have to consider from the courses or programmes that are available to them on the island and not necessarily what they are genuinely interested in or the market demands. In some cases people have to leave the island to pursue their education for the entirety of the program or can only do part of their program in Tobago and complete the remainder in Trinidad. This can cause both emotional and economical strain especially for persons with young families.

Williams (2011) reported that the Tobago Regional Health Authority (TRHA) needed an additional 623 members of staff, of these 44 vacancies were for Medical Practitioners and 200 vacancies were for nurses. Therefore, with the shortages of workers qualified in these areas on the island, the idea of expansion of existing programmes or the development of new ones should be one that is considered. Whilst healthcare has been mentioned it is not limited only to healthcare but can include areas such as Tourism, Engineering and Agriculture to meet the demands of the market. This allows for an increased number of persons in Tobago to become qualified and access key positions and opportunities on the island. It is also

understandable that it may not be feasible to have all programmes that are desired on the island but there is the capacity to develop the significant ones and broaden our horizons to attract rather than send away. One just have to envisage a situation where there is an influx of students, medical tourism, development of surrounding areas in housing, rentals, business, entertainment and the list may very well be inexhaustive and come to the realisation that so much can be done and achieved in Tobago by developing key programmes.

The Minority: Men and Persons with Disabilities

There seem to be an interesting trend and widening gap between men and women in accessing Higher Education. Women are in the majority in quite a number of the programmes thereby out numbering the men at higher educational institutions in general. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) report *Young Participation in Higher Education* (HEFCE 2005) notes that women are 18% more likely to participate in Higher Education than men. Assumptions are made about lack of aspiration and ability rather than social structures and inequalities. Jackson, (2007, p 3) argues that 'in a gendered and classed labour market, the acquisition of economically valuable skills is no guarantee of an economically valuable job'. Therefore, in a society as ours where men see themselves as the provider, have financial commitments and may not want to leave their jobs to study full time or even consider part time or in some cases do not feel motivated to attend a campus site because too society expects a man to be working and that means 8 to 4 to pay the bills and then even later for an extra income. Therefore, administrators must surely be concerned and seek to find a way to narrow the gap.

According to Leitch, (2006) it emphasizes that higher educational institutions have a responsibility to insert employability as a key concern in developing educational curriculum and programmes. Also advertising and information of programmes has to be reconsidered regarding their gender impact. More men will most likely embrace distance learning/online programmes, administrators should consider what programmes are popular amongst males, carry out research and allow the evidence to direct in terms of the types of programmes to offer.

Persons with disabilities are known to experience difficulties accessing higher education especially in relation to the physical environment or teaching and learning styles. Institutions may not be fully prepared for these students, Stodden and Dorwick, (2000) stated that the quality of support and services provided by higher educational institutions to students with

disabilities need to be improved. Stodden and Dowrick continued that institutions are still finding it difficult to provide adequate support to students with disabilities so that they may successfully complete their programmes.

Administrators are to consider the design of the physical environment, equipment, ramps, lifts, furniture, educational resources, and even staff training because according to Vogel, Leyser, Burgstahler, Sliger, and Zecker (2006), faculty may not always be aware of what are the best strategies and resources to use with students with disabilities. There should also to be policies and procedures which address the needs of students with disabilities. These students as with the men may find distance learning programme more appropriate but Kinash, Crichton, and Kim-Rupnow (2004) found that students with disabilities are not always included in the design of distance learning programme. However, Opitz (2002) emphasises that by higher educational institutions making distance learning programmes accessible to students with disability this would enhance quality standards and best practices for all its students.

Distance and rural feature

Persons residing northeast of the island as an example are at a disadvantage based on the present locations of most of the campuses that is, in or around the vicinity of the town of Scarborough. Hunt (2007) expresses that more attention needs to be paid in relation to the inclusion of students living in rural and isolated areas. Therefore, because of the distance, transport is one of the determining factors in accessing higher education this would include the type of transport available, travelling time, the expense it entailed, and of course safety. In some cases road and weather conditions have an impact especially areas with poor roads, those prone to flooding and landslides.

Liaising and lobbying for better public transport to serve rural areas or the institution providing its own transport service from designated areas to and from the institution is to be considered along with Hofferth and Iceland (1998) findings that because of the close attachment and kinship with the person living in a rural area and their family, they may prefer to stay in their own community and not move too far away. This would obviously impact on the decisions they make concerning accessing higher education outside of their community.

Open and distance learning are increasingly seen as key to providing access to those seeking higher education, especially those in rural areas. The introduction of more satellite campuses or access centres in rural areas would ensure that they also have an opportunity to

access higher education. The institutions can work individually or in collaboration with the government, community and other institutions to provide a variety of courses.

Conclusion

This paper has given administrators some practical solutions to manage both quality and access. Attention was given to key areas that are particularly relevant in managing quality and access at higher educational institutions in Tobago. Administrators have a key role in quality management it must be inclusive, embrace all aspects of the institution and be surrounded by the passion to see it succeed. People must work together and be encouraged to be a part of the process. Administrators must recognise that the attitude of a trained staff is a valuable tool which is transferred into the quality of their work and impacts greatly on the perception of quality at the institution, so too is the physical environment, which must not ignored.

The development of key programmes suitable to the needs of the people and market demands will not only allow individuals to stay on the island to complete their courses but also allow them to be qualified and fill key positions in the labour market whilst also opening doors for general development. Distant learning programmes and specialities geared towards men may close the gap between men and women and persons with disabilities in higher education while satellite campuses in rural areas bring a level of equity and access for persons living far distances.

As higher educational institutions in Tobago continues to meet and exceed the acceptable standards for educational quality and make higher education accessible to all citizens, and as administrators steer towards its successful delivery this would without a doubt provide continued growth and development not only for faculty, staff, students, the institution and its reputation but as a whole to the development of the island and its people.

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