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# Assuring Quality in Belizean Higher Education: A Collective Case Study of Institutional Perspectives and Practices

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

by

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A DISSERTATION

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Under the supervision of Professor James O'Hanlon

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

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University of Nebraska, 2012

Advisor: James O'Hanlon

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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## **Acknowledgments**

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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.



### *Significance*

A study on institutional perceptions and practices in relation to quality assurance could prove valuable to policy makers in deciding whether or not to operationalize the National Accreditation Council of Belize Act (2005) as it currently exists, to make revisions to the Act before operationalizing it, or to develop a completely different system for quality assurance. It also can help to guide decisions on the general approaches that will be used to assure quality and the expectations that institutions will be required to meet. Additionally, the study can provide a starting point for ATLIB to develop a common position on the issue of quality assurance. Taken together with future studies involving other stakeholders and aspects of the issue, the study can contribute to the data needed by policymakers to develop and implement a workable and effective quality assurance scheme for Belizean higher education.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### *Overview*

The purpose of this literature review is to describe and discuss the conceptual literature and empirical research related to quality assurance in higher education. The review begins by looking at the concept of quality and includes research on how various stakeholder groups conceptualize quality in higher education. The review then moves on to consider the relationship between how quality is defined and how it is assessed.

Various options for external quality assurance are then presented in relation to the conceptual issues reviewed in previous sections. The major models are critically reviewed, highlighting their strengths and weaknesses. The discussion then moves on to look at the internal quality assurance structures and practices associated with responding to external mandates for quality improvement and accountability. Literature on the impact of leadership and other aspects of institutional culture on quality assurance initiatives is presented.

The final sections of the review look at quality assurance in global, developing (low income economies), regional (Caribbean), and local (Belizean) contexts. Rationales for national quality assurance schemes are described. Next, the problems associated with implementing quality assurance in developing countries are discussed and regional examples are provided. The main features of the NACB Act are then presented along with a brief look at the Belizean context in which higher education operates. The review concludes with a set of lessons from the literature which were used to frame the design of the study and the analysis of findings.

### *Defining Quality*

Any useful discussion on quality assurance in higher education needs to begin by addressing the fundamental question “What do we mean by quality?” Green (1994) noted “Quality, like ‘freedom’ or ‘justice’ is an elusive concept. We all have an instinctive understanding of what it means but it is difficult to articulate” (p. 12). This has not stopped researchers, policymakers or academics from trying to measure and improve on this seemingly obscure concept.

One of the most commonly cited literature on defining quality in higher education is a series of reports and articles based on a three-year Quality in Higher Education project conducted in the United Kingdom (UK). The study’s purpose was to inform policy on the development of a methodology for assessing quality in higher education in the UK. The first task of the research team was to establish what is meant by quality in the UK context. Accordingly, the research team held discussions with employers, conducted in-depth interviews with key personnel, administered questionnaires to students and reviewed pertinent documentary material (Harvey & Green, 1993b).

The results of the UK study showed marked differences in how quality is conceptualized by various stakeholders. In particular, Harvey and Green (1993b) reported that although employers viewed quality primarily in terms of higher education’s capacity to provide an appropriately educated workforce (para. 13), the key focus of students and staff within the institutions was on resources and learning experiences (para. 27). Furthermore, government and quality assessors gave primary importance to maintaining standards and achieving efficiency (para. 33). The assumption is that one’s position in

relation to the higher education sector is likely to influence one's perspectives on the nature of quality.

Research shows that in addition to definitions of quality differing between internal and external stakeholders, disparate views on quality also can exist among members of the same stakeholder groups. For example, Telford and Masson (2005) conducted a case study to investigate quality values held by students, the teaching staff and senior management at a large business school in a major UK university. The researchers used interviews and focus groups with a sample of participants to develop a framework of quality values and then used the framework to deliver and administer questionnaires to a larger sample which included 441 students, 64 lecturing staff and 7 senior administrators (p. 113).

The researchers found that students, lecturers and managers attached different levels of importance to the various quality issues (Telford & Masson, 2005, pp. 113-115). For example, students were primarily interested in "qualification or experience that will help them in their careers" and those "activities and processes" that supported such achievements. Lecturing staff also saw vocational educational experience and support activities as important but not as important as commitment from themselves, students and the university. Managers placed high value on both vocational qualifications and commitment by lecturers but placed an even higher value than students and lecturers on what the researchers termed "the softer nature of the learning environment" such as mutual respect and effective communication between students and staff.

While the applicability of the results of these studies to other national and institutional contexts is unknown, it is not far-fetched to assume that stakeholders in any

higher education system are likely to have different perspectives on quality due to differences in their relationship to the enterprise. Ultimately, Harvey and Green (1993a) developed a framework for categorizing various viewpoints on quality higher education. The five categories are as follows: (a) *quality as exceptional*, (b) *quality as perfection or consistency*, (c) *quality as fitness for purpose*, (d) *quality as value for money*, and (e) *quality as transformation*. Following is a description of each.

*Quality as exceptional* is perhaps the oldest known and most widely regarded concept of higher education quality. Harvey and Green (1993a) described exceptionality in three ways. Firstly, exceptional can refer to an exclusive, elitist or “high class” educational institution or system. Accessibility is limited and the few that are able to engage in such a system have a certain status, a stamp of quality, automatically conferred on them. Consequently, the idea that such a person received a quality education often goes unquestioned. Secondly, exceptionality can also refer to excellence, meaning having extremely high standards which are unattainable by most. The focus in such institutions and systems is on attracting the best students and providing the best facilities and services from which quality (excellent results) then is believed to naturally flow. Such systems and institutions rely on their reputations for producing high achievers to attract more students and resources. Finally, exceptionality can be viewed in terms of passing a set of required standards. The institution or program is assessed against established standards for their inputs and outputs and given a seal of approval if they are found in conformity.

The second category, *quality as perfection or consistency*, has its origins in the manufacturing industry (Green, 1994, p. 13). Instead of looking at inputs and outputs, the

concept focuses directly on processes. The emphasis is on meeting predefined and measurable specifications. Effort is expended in minimizing “defects” through strict conformance to specifications. The aim is for “zero defects.” Applied to higher education this concept relates to conformance to the policies and procedures in an effort to ensure consistent (quality) results. Institutions that can demonstrate little or no deviation from the guidelines specified in their own operational guides or by reputable external agencies are regarded as quality institutions.

The third category, *quality as fitness for purpose*, is based on the idea of structure matching function. According to Harvey and Green (1993a), this concept varies depending on the stakeholder group. Students and employers have certain expectations of higher education. When these expectations are met, then the education is viewed as fit for its purpose and therefore being of quality. Institutions try to ensure fitness for their expressed mission. Governments, on the other hand, may be concerned not only with *fitness for purpose*, but more fundamentally with *fitness of purpose*, that is, the fitness of the institution’s purpose to the social and economic needs of the country. In other words, an institution might judge itself to be of quality because it is meeting the mission and goals it sets for itself and its students; however, another measure of quality for which the institution may be judged, is the extent to which that institution is helping to achieve larger, perhaps national, goals, in other words, the relevance of the institution’s goals to national objectives.

The fourth category, *quality as value for money*, also has its origins in the private sector. Public funding supports higher education to varying degrees in different countries. As fiscal constraints and demands for social programs grow, there is increased external

pressure on educational institutions to be transparent and efficient in their use of public funds. Furthermore, as institutions start to rely more heavily on funding sources such as tuition, students and their parents tend to become more critical about the returns on their investments. Thus governments may regard a quality institution as one that is able to serve increasing numbers of students with stable or even declining revenues. Institutions may add financial sustainability as one aspect of a quality program and refuse to offer those that draw on resources from other areas. Parents and students may be factoring in services and amenities into their concepts of quality and ultimately into their final decision on choice of institution.

Harvey and Green's final category, *quality as transformation*, sets aside ideas about exceptionality, perfection, fitness and efficiency and focuses directly on the outcomes of education, specifically the graduate. Quality is seen as enhancing or empowering the participant. The idea is that true quality is determined by measuring the value added to the student/ participant as a result of the educational experience. This transformation may be measured by an increase in the knowledge and skills or improvements in behaviors, values or attitudes of students. In this view, a quality institution or educational program is one that is able to transform the knowledge, skills, behaviors, values and attitudes of its students in ways that are regarded as relevant and desirable by the institution, society, students or parents.

Harvey and Green (1993b) found that even though stakeholders differ in their primary views on quality, there were still a number of commonalities. For example, the majority of stakeholders agreed that the following components are essential to quality: (a) adequate physical and human resources; (b) clear aims and objectives; (c) relevant

subject content; and (d) valid, fair and objective assessments. Participants in the study also mentioned providing students with transferable knowledge and skills as essential. The authors came to the following conclusion: “The best that can be achieved is to define, as clearly as possible, the criteria used by each interest group when judging *quality* and for those competing views to be taken into account when assessments of *quality* are undertaken” (Harvey and Green, 1993b, para. 9).

### ***Implications for Assessing Quality***

Tam (2001) stated that “To understand quality it is necessary to recognize that it has contradictory meanings that can lead to different assessment methods and thus different practical outcomes” (pp. 53-54). For example, if quality is viewed as elitist, then quality assurance is achieved primarily by controlling inputs such as students and educational resources. Accepting primarily high achievers and maintaining high levels of resources would be two such strategies. Under such conditions there is little or no need for quality assessment since high quality inputs are assumed to result automatically in high quality outputs. According to UNESCO’s (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) International Institute for Educational Planning [IIEP] (2007d), the fact that few institutions are able to reach such high standards makes this particular definition of quality impractical for widespread quality assurance purposes.

A quality assurance system based on meeting standards would assume that if the education process conforms to established standards then quality can be assured. According to the IIEP (2007d), conformance to standards is the approach to quality that is used by most regulatory bodies. Those institutions that conform to pre-determined standards and meet certain threshold levels receive recognition and approval. If



perfection is what is valued, then consistent compliance with specifications needs to be measured. Assessment of quality thus takes the form of audits of the process. The objects of measurement are the structures and processes for assuring quality and not the actual inputs or outputs of the institution.

When the concept of fitness for purpose dominates quality assurance, strategies such as student and employer surveys to identify expectations and needs and to determine the extent to which those needs have been met are normally incorporated. Likewise, the extent to which an institution meets its stated objectives and satisfies its market and customers is measured to determine its quality. The regional accreditation system in the United States is based on this concept of quality. The primary criticisms of fitness for purpose are that it is removed from any “objective” measure of quality and leaves institutions to define and assess their own quality (Harvey & Green, 1993a; IIEP, 2007d).

Under the value-for-money definition, assessment of quality takes the form of performance indicators such as student faculty ratios, retention rates and cost per student. The tendency with this view is to focus more on cost control and quantitative outputs than on effectiveness and qualitative outcomes (Harvey & Green, 1993a). Finally, if quality is seen as transformative, assessment efforts focus on enhancements in a student’s knowledge, skills and abilities as well as his/her level of empowerment. The extent of democratization of the education process and educational outcomes are seen as measures of quality (Harvey & Green, 1993a). Consequently, measurement of learning outcomes is emphasized.

Clearly, quality assurance systems that are based on philosophies divergent to that of key stakeholders are likely to face problems in implementation and operation.

Nonetheless, those who are charged with the responsibility for designing quality assurance systems must be able to reconcile the disparate perceptions of quality and establish a conceptual framework, and an overarching philosophy, for the system. Questions such as who should define quality in higher education and what mechanisms ought to be used to assure (assess, monitor, enhance) quality have both philosophical and political underpinnings (Harvey & Green, 1993a). As Lemaitre (2002) asserted, “Definitions of quality are never neutral, or innocent. They are about balances of power, within higher education and between higher education and other social actors” (p. 34). A country’s history, political system, higher education traditions, current environmental conditions and the philosophies and power relations among those involved will no doubt contribute to decisions about the objects, standards, subjects and values used to define and assure quality.

### *Options for External Quality Assurance*

Gates et al. (2002) in their book *Ensuring Quality and Productivity in Higher Education* described a broad framework for classifying quality assessment strategies. They first classified two phases of Quality Assessment. Phase I refers to System Level Assessment. In Phase I Assessment, governments or education systems detect where there is misalignment between customer needs, system level needs and providers’ offerings. They also determine whether or not resources are being allocated in an optimal manner. Phase I involves complex needs analysis which is normally difficult to accomplish (p. 15).

Phase II assessment is focused on individual providers (institutions) and their role in meeting customer needs. It can take one of four forms. In Model I, the provider does

its own assessment and an intermediary body reviews its assessment process. An example of Model I is the process used in academic or quality audits. Institutions have considerable control over their assessment processes and criteria. The role of the intermediary body is simply to evaluate the institution's compliance with its own criteria and processes (Gates et al, 2002, pp. 24-28).

In Model II an intermediary body, either governmental or private, designs and conducts the assessment process. State higher education governing and coordinating boards are examples of one type of Model II assessment. In these cases, institutional participation is mandatory. Accreditation is a second type of Model II assessment. It is normally a voluntary process. In both cases, the criteria and procedures are determined externally either by the government or accreditation agency. Individual institutions have little influence over the criteria and process; however, government and accreditation agencies may rely heavily on input from institutions in developing and reviewing criteria and processes (Gates et al, 2002, pp. 24-36).

Models III and IV de-emphasize the relationship between institutions and intermediaries. Model III is an insular process involving the provider both designing and conducting the assessment process without the involvement of an intermediary body. Strategies for incorporating stakeholder perspectives may be included as well. Activities such as program reviews and stakeholder surveys which are done for improvement rather than accountability purposes would fall under this model (Gates et al, 2002, pp. 36-41).

Model IV involves either the provider or an intermediary organization directly assessing student competencies. This strategy deviates considerably from those of the first three models. There is no direct assessment of the institution or its services. The

focus is on determining what students know and are able to do after completing their programs (Gates et al, 2002, pp. 41-44).

Models of quality assessment do not operate in isolation. They become part of a comprehensive system of assessing, monitoring, guaranteeing, maintaining, and improving quality of entire higher education systems, institutions or programs, in other words, a national, regional, professional or institutional quality assurance system. In addition to assessment strategies, quality assurance systems have purposes, goals and expectations.

According to the IIEP (2007a), existing external quality assurance systems have three main purposes: (a) quality control- ensuring institutions meet minimum requirements for quality, (b) accountability/ guidance- providing assurance to the public of the sector's conformance with quality standards or steering the higher education system in a particular direction; and (c) improvement—helping institutions to improve existing practices and move towards higher standards. Clarifying the purpose is the first step in choosing the right model for quality assurance (Gates et al., 2002). For example, models of assessment in which institutions decide for themselves what criteria and processes to use may be less suitable for accountability purposes than an assessment model which collects uniform information from all institutions and involves sanctions and rewards and processes. Some assessment systems focus primarily on improvement and thus use more flexible strategies to allow for diverse institutional missions. Nevertheless, Gates et al. (2002) contend that “an assessor need not commit to a single model for quality improvement assessment but [may] choose different models for different assessment tasks in the system” (p. 51).

In addition to considering purpose, Gates et al. (2002) suggested that other factors be taken into account when choosing an approach to quality assessment such as the level of authority government has over the higher education system, the level of resources it has available and other contextual issues such as the centralization of operations and the level of heterogeneity and complexity of the system.

#### *Level of Authority*

Blackmur (2007) described a number of ways governments can influence the characteristics and quality of their higher education systems. Legislative authority is one example. Higher education may fall under broad legal institutions and frameworks. These include criminal, labor, administrative or commercial laws, as well as national constitutions and state institutions. Higher education also may be dealt with by specific higher education statutes. These may be in the form of either systemic or institution-specific regulations that define the structure and functions of institutional governing bodies (Blackmur, 2007).

In addition to legislation, it is common for governments to have direct influence over higher education through regulatory agencies. These may be in the form of public monopoly agencies, private professional bodies, or other private entities (Blackmur, 2007). Affiliation of quality assurance agencies also varies. For example, they may be established (a) as a governmental agency, e.g., as a unit in a Ministry; (b) as a private body fully independent of the government in its establishment and functioning, e.g., established by higher education institutions; (c) without government or higher education institutions having a role in its establishment or functioning, e.g., established by a professional association; and (d) established as a quasi-governmental buffer or under a

local buffer organization (i.e. government has a role in its initiation but it may be governed independently of government) (IIEP, 2007c).

Additional influence from governments can come in the form of public finance methods as well. As Blackmur (2007) indicated, in state-run or state-supported institutions, fiscal incentives, public subsidies, research funding and state purchase of services from institutions can be used to influence the characteristics and quality of higher education systems. Although for some institutions successful participation in external quality assurance mechanisms such as accreditation may serve merely as a means of obtaining recognition and prestige, in many systems, quality assurance outcomes are also tied to public funding and regulation. Practices include (a) directly linking public funding and outcomes such that a positive quality assurance outcome is used as a criterion for receiving funds, (b) linking positive outcomes to incentives in an effort to encourage involvement in quality assurance, and (c) linking positive outcomes to opportunities for increased de-regulation and autonomy.

Therefore, a government with a high level of authority and financial control over institutions could easily adopt an accountability agenda and enforce its regulations on providers; however, there are many other factors to consider before taking such a stance.

#### *Level of Resources*

Quality assessment costs regardless of option chosen. These costs include (a) expenses related to administration of the process, such as salaries, facilities and development of materials, salaries for core staff of the agency; (b) expenses related to self-assessment exercises, such as training activities and institutional expenses for

collecting data and preparing reports; and (c) expenses related to the external review process, such as travel and living expenses of reviewers (IIEP, 2007c).

Externally controlled and student-centered models could be very expensive for regulatory agencies. In many government-initiated or controlled systems, the government provides at least the initial funding for assessment services and may continue to pay at least part of the expenses of running the regulatory agency (IIEP, 2007c). Voluntary accreditation or institutionally-driven assessment shifts some or the entire financial burden to institutions (Gates et al., 2002). A possible cost-sharing solution which occurs in some countries is for government to fund the operational costs of the agency while institutions cover the cost of registration and accreditation expenses such as preparation of self-studies and hosting of reviewers (IIEP, 2007c).

#### *Other Contextual Issues*

Additional factors have to do with the characteristics of institutions and the cultural and historical relationships between the government and institutions. As indicated previously, Gates et al. (2002) considered centralization of operations, system heterogeneity and provider complexity very important in choosing the right model. Centralization of operations has to do with the degree to which the basic functions and guiding policies of the education system are coordinated and directed by a central authority. Assessment is more straightforward in systems that are centralized. The size, geographic location, number of programs and organizational affiliation of providers are all aspects of system heterogeneity and complexity. Gates et al. (2002) suggested that the greater the variance in institutions, the more difficult it will be to assess quality or productivity using common indicators.

There are several other organizational and methodological choices to consider when choosing an external quality assurance system. For example, decisions have to be made about whether the system would (a) be either compulsory or voluntary, (b) emphasize either internal (fitness-for-purpose) or external standards, or (c) be based on minimum or high level standards (IIEP, 2007d). The final decision among the various quality assurance choices also has to be based on knowledge of the unique context, for example, the history and culture of institutions and systems and an understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of each model. In the end, the nature, purpose, and mechanisms chosen need to relate to each other as well as to the circumstances under which the external quality assurance system is expected to operate.

### *Common Approaches*

A range of external quality assurance mechanisms operate worldwide; however, the three basic approaches are accreditation, assessment (as defined in the European system) and academic audit. Dill and Massy (1996) outlined the features of the three approaches as follows:

1. Accreditation combines performance indicators, self-study, and peer review. It encompasses both objectives and the implementation of objectives. Ultimately, accreditation certifies to the public that an institution or program meets minimum educational standards.
2. Assessment (synonymous with systematic program review) also incorporates performance indicators, self-study and peer review; however, it is less comprehensive than accreditation, focusing only on the evaluation of specific activities at the subject or program level. Assessment also goes beyond



accreditation in making judgments about levels of quality rather than just whether or not minimum standards have been attained.

3. Academic audits differ from accreditation and assessments in several respects. First of all, there are usually no common performance indicators by which institutions are judged. Second of all, the focus is not on the assessment of the quality of inputs, outputs or outcomes. Rather, academic audits evaluate the processes an institution uses to assure quality, such as policy statements, rules and procedures.

It is important to note that the terms assessment, audit and accreditation are not used exactly the same in all countries; however, some key elements seem to be universal. For example, Stensaker and Harvey (2006) in their comparison of accreditation schemes found common input, process and outcome factors among a variety of accrediting agencies. Aelterman (2006) also found comparable standards between various accreditation networks.

### *Accreditation*

Accreditation operates differently in various countries. For this discussion the regional accreditation mechanism of the United States will be the focus. The fact that regional accrediting agencies are self-appointed and self-regulating means that they are not legally or otherwise accountable to anyone other than their members. This level of autonomy has caused growing concern among U. S. political leaders.

Regional accrediting agencies in the United States are private non-profit organizations responsible for quality review. They create their own policies, develop their own criteria and operate by peer evaluations. The federal government's involvement is

limited to recognition of accrediting agencies through the Federal Recognition System and funding of accredited institutions and students who attend them. While the federal government, through its recognition system, could potentially dictate what accreditors (and by extension institutions) are required to do, these regulations have remained broad and unchanged since 1998. Attempts to make any significant changes to the relationship between the federal government and accreditation agencies have been stymied, effectively keeping the Federal Recognition system and accrediting agencies as a buffer between the federal government and institutions (Brittingham, 2008).

The nature and philosophy of regional accreditation makes it a prime target for criticism from those outside of academia. The process is mission-driven and reflects the wide diversity of institution types and purposes. It is based on criteria developed through consensus and established by members. The focus is on *fitness for purpose* not necessarily *fitness of purpose*. According to Baker (2002), “regional accreditation is grounded in traditional academic values of self-regulation, academic integrity, and collective responsibility.” These values seem somewhat at odds with the current prevalence of quality, efficiency and accountability values in American society.

“A Test of Leadership,” the 2006 report of the education commission appointed by Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings to examine the state of American higher education, focused on access, affordability, accountability and quality. The report was very critical of higher education. Commissioners reported that the accreditation system had “significant shortcomings” and went on to state that “The growing public demand for increased accountability, quality and transparency coupled with the changing structure

and globalization of higher education requires a transformation of accreditation” (U.S. Department of Education, 2006, p.14).

The primary recommendations of the commission were (a) public disclosure of measures of learning, (b) development of unit record system to track student performance, and (c) creation of National Accreditation Framework (Alderman & Brown, 2005). Weissburg and Ranville (2007) commented that “There is little question that the report released by the Spellings commission is, at least in part, a result of political differences between the Democrats and the Republicans” (p. 11). The Spellings Commission, a Republican initiative, wanted accreditors to make student performance outcomes the core of their assessment and called for comparisons of institutions and public disclosure of final results.

According to Eaton (2001), accreditation reform in the United States has primarily focused on the following six areas: (a) “revising accreditation standards to focus on quality improvement,” (b) “using regional accreditation to address national quality-review needs,” (c) “attending to quality review of distance learning,” (d) “expanding international quality-review activity,” (e) “expanding attention to teaching and learning,” and (f) “achieving greater efficiency through coordination across accrediting organizations” (pp. 40-42). Therefore, reforms have addressed mostly the needs identified by accreditation’s internal constituents. The concerns and criticisms of external constituents have not received as much attention.

It is not that accrediting agencies and institutions have completely ignored these concerns. According to Davenport (2001), prior to the 1980’s the focus of accreditation was on processes, procedures and inputs. Now that focus has shifted substantially to

results, outputs and outcomes. In response to increasing calls for accountability, regional accreditors began to include criteria requiring gathering of data on student learning. This major shift in focus on student learning started in the 1990's (Brittingham, 2008). The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools introduced its Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) and the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association incorporated the concept of an Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP). Nonetheless, accreditors have been slow to respond to calls for more evidence on student learning and sharing of this information with the public.

One of the key philosophical differences concerns the purpose and use of assessment (Brittingham, 2008). In accreditation, the purpose of assessment is primarily to gather relevant information that corresponds to institutional goals. This information is evaluated and used to further improve achievement of those same goals. The approach is inquiry rather than testing and the institution is the key assessor of itself. This results in a wide range of methods for assessment and reporting, making comparability across institutions problematic. Accountability, on the other hand demands measures of student achievement with comparable results, such as that obtained from standardized testing and the proposed student unit record system. Brittingham noted that such broad comparability criteria may currently be applicable only to large state public systems with singular missions and would not be able to capture the complexity and diversity of the U.S. higher education system.

Prescribing outcomes and measurement of outcomes, which seems to be the public call, is complicated by the wide range of institutional goals and the variety of subject matter offered by institutions accredited by regional agencies (Weissburg &

Ranville, 2007). The issue of student achievement is easier for specialized accreditors than it is for regional accreditors. Specialized accreditation focuses on specific disciplines, most of which have well-established examinations and licensing requirements. It is easier to track achievement and employment success in these professional areas as well. Doing the same thing on an institution-wide level with more comprehensive missions is much harder.

Collecting information on student achievement is one issue, sharing that information publicly is another. Eaton et al. (2005), called the public disclosure of accreditation information “the most vexatious, complex and controversial issue” in the recent reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (p. 43). They indicated that *who* is asking the question may be even more important than the question about accountability itself. The fact that it is the federal government brings into play issues of control, autonomy, and academic freedom.

It is important to note that accreditors are not unified on the issue of disclosure. There are those who believe that the information normally collected through the accreditation process is useless to the public and warn of the potential for lawsuits and political or journalistic abuse; those who believe disclosure would undermine the fundamental principles of assessment for improvement; others who argue that the type of information the public desires is already available; and those who see no danger in disclosure (Eaton et al., 2005). It appears that the issue of disclosure is one that will continue to be debated for a long time.

### *Audits*

The academic audit system used by the UK through its Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), have many similarities with accreditation. Like accreditation, the process involves institutional preparation of a self-evaluation document, institutional visits and summary evaluation reports. There are, however, some important philosophical and operational differences between accreditation and audits. For example, the QAA does not deal with fiscal, budgetary or governance issues, nor does it look at salaries and conditions of services. There is no link between audit results and government funding as in accreditation (Alderman & Brown, 2005).

Furthermore, audits focus heavily on comparability of academic standards and results are made public, which is completely different from the reality of accreditation. Audits are also performed more frequently than accreditation visits. Although there are usually no specific standards to guide the process, evaluators often draw on externally-developed national articulation frameworks, degree standards and program specifications. Another difference is the relatively low cost of self-regulating systems compared to externally regulated systems. Accrediting agencies operate with small staffs and with the generosity of a large team of academic volunteers unlike the large staffs often associated with audits (Brittingham, 2008).

Critics claim that similar to accreditation, audits and inspectorates have failed to make institutions accountable because of the lack of serious incentives and sanctions, especially financial. Interestingly, Scheele (2004) reported a growing trend in Europe to introduce accreditation systems. Among the countries turning to accreditation are Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Austria and Spain; however, there are

differences in the definition and application of the principles of accreditation among those countries and what is practiced in the U.S.

### *Assessments*

Assessments (academic/program/quality reviews) may be directed either by an external body or an individual institution. According to Dill and Massy (1996) the benefits of assessment over accreditation or audits include the greater emphasis on teaching and learning, the increased communication that occurs among subject faculty across institutions and the improvements in department mechanisms for quality assurance.

The authors also highlighted a number of disadvantages of assessments. They claimed that when assessments are controlled by external agencies, some of these benefits may not be realized. Instead, a culture of compliance is observed and a sense of collective responsibility for quality is not fostered. Focus on subject-specific outcomes and processes may also lessen collegial interactions across departments, and uncoordinated visits by various subject assessment teams may be burdensome on the institution (Dill & Massy et al., 1996). Similar criticisms may be made of professional accreditation.

Alderman and Brown (2005) predicted a future convergence of some sort between accreditation and audit. In accreditation, it is likely that summaries of reports will be made public, as well as names of evaluators. They also predict that traditional audit is likely to change in response to pressures from the education sector concerning over-regulation and from external pressures demanding more than minimum standards. This is already being seen in the Dutch system, which introduced accreditation (assumably for

its quality improvement benefits) on top of its inspectorate (supposedly the accountability benefits) (Scheele, 2004). What is clear from the various literature discussing accreditation, audits and assessments is that the processes continue to evolve and respond to changes in the philosophies and expectations of stakeholders.

### *Institutional Responses to Quality Assurance*

Regardless of the approach taken, external quality assurance mechanisms ultimately rely on what is happening within higher education institution—the internal policies and procedures for quality assurance. Assessors need to determine whether or not exceptionality is practiced, processes conform to specifications, the mission and curriculum are fit-for-purpose, or students are transformed to the extent desired. It is the institution, its programs, infrastructure, policies and practices that is the focus of quality assessment.

Institutions in countries with external quality assurance systems in place have found it necessary to make a number of adjustments to their structures and processes. For example, many institutions in these countries now have teaching and learning centers, institutional research offices, and plans for assessment of student learning outcomes. It is a given that certain infrastructure, policies, organizational units and evaluation processes need to be in place for institutions to carry out the self-assessments and quality improvements that external bodies require. Dill (1999) aptly made this point when he noted,

While the specific mechanisms of academic accountability implemented in countries such as the UK, continental Europe, the Nordic Countries, and Asia vary, they appear to embody similar assumptions about university behavior. That is, that: 1) methods of measurement exist by which professors can determine that academic quality has been attained; 2) processes can be implemented to encourage the exchange and transfer of knowledge pertinent to academic quality; and 3) this



knowledge can be applied to the improvement of teaching and learning. In short, the perspective on academic accountability that is influencing the development of quality assurance policies in a number of countries appears to assume that universities – with regard to their core processes of teaching and learning – can become learning organizations. (p. 128)

Dill's case study research on quality assurance in a sample of universities worldwide provided some insight into the characteristics of academic learning organizations. Dill found that university adaptations to external quality assurance occurred to some degree in all of the following areas: (a) systematic problem solving, (b) learning from one's own experience, (c) learning from others' experience, (d) experimentation with new approaches, (e) transferring knowledge, and (f) measuring learning. The adaptations he found were both structural and procedural.

#### *Structural Adaptations*

Responding to an accountability mandate when there was previously none, often requires changes to basic academic organization within institutions. Administrative structures designed to monitor academic quality vary depending on institutional affiliation and institutional culture. Universities usually give academic boards, academic committees or the academic senate responsibilities for academic quality assurance. Alternatively, responsibility for quality assurance may be given to specialists committees or boards. The focus of these various committees and boards range from reviews of particular courses, programs or functions to reviews of entire departments, faculties or schools depending on their jurisdiction (Harman, 1998).

Harman (1998) noted that in fulfilling their mandates, chief academic officers are normally supported by a variety of personnel and committees. An increasing number of institutions are employing personnel specifically to manage the assessment functions of

their institutions. The position titles vary and include those with clear reference to assessment such as *Director of Assessment* and more generic versions such as *Assistant Vice-Provost* and positions may be either full-time or part-time (Wildey, Vanek & Trevisan, 2003). Wildey et al. also found that assessment coordinators typically work along with institution-wide or departmental committees. Dill (1999) also found university-wide quality and evaluation committees, central administrative positions and support services in the cases he studied. The roles of these structures were to provide leadership and technical assistance, including professional development, to individual faculty and departments.

#### *Procedural Adaptations*

The most pronounced procedural adaptation has had to do with institutional self-evaluation. The self-evaluation or self-study process has become an integral part of most external quality assurance models. Institutions are expected to collect, evaluate and present data on various aspects of institutional conditions and operations. Academic or program review is one form of self-evaluation that is a common feature of higher education in the United States. Academic reviews may be conducted in response to State requirements, Board mandates or accreditation criteria. In such cases, the review is based on pre-determined criteria and the process is accountability-driven. In other cases academic reviews may be completely university-driven and have an improvement-based agenda.

Usually program reviews are conducted in cycles of three to seven years. The decision regarding which programs will undergo academic review is usually made by the chief academic officer in consultation with the relevant deans and program chairs.

Existing academic committees and councils also play a prominent role in oversight of the process.

Academic review typically involves a self-study, followed by an external evaluation team site visit and follow-up activities. Self-studies are normally conducted by program faculty. Other common features of program review include the following: (a) review teams comprised mostly of individuals external to the institution who are knowledgeable about the field under review, (b) external review teams provide a report on their findings, (c) program faculty at some stage of the process receive the report and are required to provide feedback to administrators, and (d) the results of the review are linked in some way to other institutional processes such as budgeting/ resource allocation, strategic planning and curriculum development.

Another related practice that is gaining increased attention is outcomes assessment. Outcomes assessment as a process is not independent of academic reviews or accreditation; in fact, it is the results of outcomes assessment that provide much of the information for self-studies conducted as a part of academic review and accreditation processes. Recent outcomes assessment efforts in U.S. institutions have been in response to changing accreditation criteria, particularly over the last decade, which in turn was a response to external pressures for higher education to prove the impact it was having on student learning.

Assessment of student learning and program effectiveness can take on many forms. The type of data collected, methods used to collect data, the nature of analysis used and the impact of data on institutional improvement varies depending on the mission, context and tradition of an institution. Institutions can collect various types of

cognitive, affective and behavioral data depending on their interests and mission.

Traditional course-based, teacher-designed assessments are being supplemented by newer assessments that focus on the long-term achievement of core learning outcomes by all students. Such methods include comprehensive exams, performance-based artifacts such as portfolios and capstone projects, as well as the conduct of surveys and interviews and the tracking of various types of institutional data. The level of analysis also varies from simple descriptive summaries of student data to more complex relational studies (Peterson & Einarson, 2001). This more recent trend in measuring education outcomes requires that institutions adopt more sophisticated structures and procedures.

Ideally, institutions develop a *culture of evaluation*. Kells (1995, p. 463) noted that this concept includes “the extent to which the institution is able and willing to regulate itself, the extent to which it is a self-regulating university, and the awareness, readiness and preferences of its professionals concerning evaluation and regulation methods.” Developing a culture of evaluation is no easy task. Important considerations include “the knowledge, experience and preferences of the leaders and the general body of professionals,” “the previous experiences they have had,” and “the infrastructure for evaluation.” According to Kells, the infrastructure for evaluation includes: “databases; experience with survey and interview methods; leaders with group process experience, diagnostic capabilities, workshop experience and knowledge of change strategies; and the collective attitudes about evaluation and client perceptions as an element of choice-making and management in general” (Kells, 1995, p. 463).

Peterson and Einerson (2001) suggested that assessment policies and practices be integrated with other institutional processes. These would include links to internal

resource allocation, academic support services, professional development, academic planning and review and strategic planning- indeed, all facets of quality assurance. These activities also need to be research-based and data-driven if they are to be effective.

Welsh, Alexander and Dey (2001) highlighted the need for databases that can help to integrate the information collected through assessment. They provided an example of a continuous quality measurement system implemented at the University of Louisville in Kentucky. The system included data from 313 constituent satisfaction surveys with links to each academic unit and program and other relevant institutional data. The system allowed for data-driven decision making and encouraged use of the assessment data for improvement which closes both the assessment and quality assurance loop.

Dill's (1999) proposed a five-point model for academic learning organizations. According to the model, an academic learning organization (a) *exhibits a culture of evidence in problem-solving*. This means that they have effective data collection mechanisms, defined measures of student learning, quality assurance policies and codes of practice, and use these mechanisms in problem solving; (b) *improves coordination of teaching units*. This is achieved for example, through the establishment of faculty committees, curriculum coordinators and academic units to coordinate curriculum development and delivery; (c) *learns from others* through such practices as the use of external program reviewers, establishing external curriculum advisory committees, conducting surveys of program graduates, and benchmarking against peer institutions or international criteria; (d) *coordinates learning university-wide* through interdepartmental committees and teaching and learning centers that provide support for initiatives; and (e) *successfully transfers knowledge within the institution* so that improvements can be made.

### *Institutional Culture and Quality Assurance*

Of course, selection of appropriate approaches to external quality assurance and establishment of internal quality assurance structures and procedures do not guarantee quality improvement. As previously noted, the original quality policy intended by accrediting agencies is often changed during implementation (Davies et al., 2007). This phenomenon may be related to various factors including, (a) perceptual differences between leaders and academics (João Rosa, Tevares & Amaral, 2006; Telford & Masson, 2005; Welsh & Metcalf, 2003); (b) the influence that institutional leaders have on the quality assurance system (Brunetto & Farr-Wharton, 2005; Mehralizadeh et al., 2007; Osseo-Asare, Longbottom & Murphy, 2005); and (c) other conceptual and contextual issues inherent in academic culture.

#### *Perceptual Differences*

João Rosa et al. (2006) conducted a survey of 12 rectors and 93 academics responsible for coordinating accreditation reports in Portugal. The respondents were asked to critically analyze the quality assessment system and to make proposals for improvement. The researchers found that administrators more often had an over-optimistic view of the positive impact of quality assessment and a more positive view of the institution's capacity to implement quality improvement measures than did academics.

Moreover, research has shown that many academics perceive quality assurance systems as burdensome (Newton, 2002; Harvey, 2004b; Anderson, 2006). Harvey noted, "A recurrent theme was the amount of work involved in some programme accreditation. A problem accentuated by rigidity of requirements, perceived at best as heavy-handed

bureaucracy and at worst as an unnecessary degree of control” (p. 218). Anderson (2006) also found that academics continue to view quality assurance in the same negative way they did almost two decades after their initial study.

In their case studies on the effect of academic culture on the implementation of the European Foundation for Quality Management’s (EFQM) Excellence Model, Davies et al. (2007) found individualism and the critical nature of staff to be significant barriers to implementation. Ultimately, it is the academics on whose shoulders genuine implementation and sustainability of quality initiatives fall (Brunetto & Farr-Wharton, 2005). Newton (2002) commented that academics are “‘active’ and not ‘passive’ participants in the process.” Welsh and Metcalf (2003) put it bluntly: “Faculty support for institutional effectiveness activities is likely to determine their fate” (p. 458).

### *Leadership*

Despite the foregoing discussion, supportive leadership and academic structures can have a large influence on the outcomes of quality assurance activities. For example, Welsh and Metcalf (2003) established that faculty support could be obtained if faculty perceived that (a) the primary motivation for the activities is improvement in the institution’s programs or services, instead of fulfillment of an external mandate; and that (b) they are personally involved in the quality improvement activities. Furthermore, though they found significant differences in attitudes between the faculty and academic administrators of the 168 U.S. institutions surveyed, they cautioned that the differences did not represent as sharp an ideological divide as often assumed.

Osseo-Asare et al.’s 2006 study sought to identify leadership best practices for sustaining quality in UK higher education from the perspective of the EFQM excellence

model. They reviewed documents and used semi-structured interviews and questionnaires to collect perceptions from academic quality managers in 42 UK Higher education institutions. They concluded that the majority of respondents and interviewees agreed with the following: (a) “the implementation of policy, strategy, and core processes will be more successful if closely coupled with leadership;” (b) requirements are “best met if ‘policy and strategy’ are seen as an integral part of the key responsibilities of leadership for quality at all levels of the institution;” and (c) “leadership should not be separated from policy, strategy, and process ownership” (p. 158).

Mehralizadeh et al. (2007) likewise found lack of university management and structural support to be major barriers for implementing internal evaluation in Iran. Another major barrier was the inadequacy of budget and resources for conducting self-evaluations. Therefore, leaders do not only have to be convinced of the importance of such efforts, but they also have to be able to put in place the financial and structural support needed to make the efforts successful. Kells (1995) made the following observation:

What leaders, governments and change agents of all kinds have learned painfully (or should have learned) is that unless the institution is ready, unless a significant number of the formal and informal leaders are interested in using the proposed scheme to accomplish high priority items on their agenda, one should not proceed with the intervention. Unless the key working professionals are comfortable with the method because they have helped to design its local implementation, including sometimes the building of some elements of the infrastructure, and unless one takes the time to accomplish these things in ways attuned to the local needs and rhythms, very little will happen, or that which is introduced will fail in such complex institutions. (p. 466)

Brunetto and Farr-Wharton (2005) proposed a model for implementation of quality initiatives that places senior managers at the center of the process. The model is based on the propositions that senior managers interact with both the internal and external



environments of their institutions and that leadership and organizational culture are closely interrelated and impact the behavior of institutional actors. The proposed model looks at the impact of the level of resources accompanying policy, the external and internal accountability expectations, organizational culture and leadership. A key feature of organizational culture is the need for leaders to align work place practices with official organizational policy. According to the model, the general attitude and behavioral responses of organizational management to quality initiatives are crucial to its success as well.

Newton (2002) advised,

What is achievable with ‘quality’ in a higher education organization should not be seen as a blank sheet. The size, stage of development, strategic priorities, blend of organizational politics, and even the particular vulnerabilities of a college, are key considerations. (p. 187)

Clearly, an academic culture in which leadership styles and administrative structures are already conducive to quality improvement and inclusion, could help to ease the introduction of external quality assurance initiatives. Resolving or at least becoming aware of these issues prior to developing and implementing a quality assurance policy or system is highly advisable. 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.

### ***Quality Assurance in a Global Context***

In addition to the massification of higher education, Barnett (2004) cited the following factors as some of the largest universal changes occurring in higher education:

- globalisation;

- the revolution brought by the arrival of digital technologies; the interpenetration of higher education with the wider host society;
- agendas of participation, access and equal opportunities;
- marketisation of higher education, with institutions identifying their knowledge services for potential customers;
- competition;
- the development of systematic and nationwide state-sponsored quality evaluation mechanisms. (pp. 62-63)

Similarly, the IIEP (2007a) highlighted several major world-wide trends in higher education systems. “Growing social demand and expansion of systems” are at the top of that list (p. 6). World-wide, higher education enrollment increased from 69.4 million in 1998/1999 to 138 million in 2004/2005. Enrollment in China alone almost quadrupled during the same time period. In an effort to meet this growing demand, alternative types of institutions and new forms of delivery have developed.

Another important trend is the increase in the “privatization of higher education” (IIEP, 2007a, p. 6). Even in countries with a long history of public higher education, private providers are increasingly seen as a viable and attractive alternative. Additionally, public institutions are beginning to take on many privatization features in an attempt to augment revenues. The IIEP (2007a) credited this increased acceptance of private providers and privatization with the fact that although enrollment continues to increase, in many cases, there is no corresponding increase in the financial capacity or willingness of governments to fund higher education.

The question of whether higher education is a public or private good has long been debated; however, the financial returns for persons who complete higher education cannot be denied. According to the IIEP (2007a), this fact has led to a trend where higher education is increasingly regarded as a private good. The result is a shifting of the cost of higher education from the public purse to students and their families. Private providers

have capitalized on this trend. They now compete with traditional providers for students who are interested in particular professional training to boost their income or access new job markets. Moreover, these new types of students do not mind paying for these services out of their own pockets.

“Deregulation and governments’ demand for value for money” is an additional trend cited by the IIEP (2007a, p. 7). Governments are redefining the nature of public authorities and as a consequence, previously state-controlled institutions find themselves in an era of increased decision-making power and control over their operations. Even so, self-regulation and autonomy are not given without some conditions. Governments have simultaneously increased their demand for institutions to be more accountable.

Accountability usually translates into requirements that institutions measure their efficiency in using resources and their effectiveness in meeting the needs of the local economy.

There are, of course, several other social and economic trends that currently impact higher education world-wide. According to the IIEP (2007a), these include “a shift to the market and consumer demand for market transparency” and “globalization” (pp. 7-8). The collective result of all these trends is a higher education sector that is more competitive and more willing to see students as *customers*. These *customers* are now demanding access to educational services of high standards and qualifications that will provide them with access to global job markets.

Pressures on higher education also have a direct impact on the nature and operation of quality assurance. Salmi (2002) identified economic globalization, the growing importance of knowledge, and the information and communication revolution as

the three major challenges faced by higher education. The implication according to Salmi is that higher education will face radical changes in training needs, new forms of competition and new configurations and modes of operation for institutions. He further claimed that “the emergence of these new forms of competition is likely to change the nature of quality assurance mechanisms and criteria” (Salmi, 2002, p. 11).

Harvey (2004a) likewise pointed to the “globalization of higher education; the growth of transnational education;” and “increasing pressure for international or cross-national recognition of qualifications” as the main reasons for the internationalization of quality assurance (p. 65). Examples of this movement include the establishment of the International Network of Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (INQAAHE), the Bologna Declaration in Europe and the MERCOSUR process of mutual recognition in South America. In the United States, CHEA, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, has published a proposal for an international confederation for quality review. According to Harvey, internationalization of quality could take one of three forms: (a) supranational agencies, such as CHEA, which focus solely on evaluating existing agencies within national boundaries, (b) a system of mutual recognition between national agencies such as in the case of INQAAHE; and (c) multi-national agencies such as the Centro-American Accreditation Council.

These developments are not without logistical and political problems. International agencies need to deal with challenges such as language and cultural compatibility, especially in the peer review process. Proponents for the development of a *world quality register* retreated under the difficulty of garnering the support of national governments who are generally in charge of quality assurance and higher education and

have varying philosophical approaches to quality assurance. It is also feared that internationalization of accreditation could open the gates for greater competition between transnational universities and local institutions (Harvey, 2004a).

### *Quality Assurance in a Developing Context*

The previous literature highlights the fact that quality assessment and assurance are contentious issues and that existing approaches to external and internal quality assurance continue to evolve. While much has been written about how these processes are occurring in the United States, Europe and Australia, the stories from Africa, Asia and the rest of the world are only now emerging. It is clear that higher education, and quality assurance for that matter, take on new meaning viewed in a developing context.

The World Bank's Task Force on Higher Education and Society (2000) report *Higher Education in Developing Countries: Peril and Promise*, highlighted several major obstacles faced by higher education in developing countries. Among these are the "absence of vision," "lack of political and financial commitment," "conditions of initial disadvantage," "poor management of resources," and "disruptions of globalization" (pp. 93-95). The authors of the report claimed a link between higher education and income growth, enlightened leadership and expansion of choices for citizens; however, the links between higher education and these social and economic factors seems not to be sufficiently appreciated in developing countries.

Developing countries are characterized by severe resource constraints and highly competitive political settings. They have poor baselines to start with. According to the report a critical mass of scholars and teachers needs to be reached before higher education can thrive. This condition is further worsened by the migration of the brightest

faculty and students from developing countries to more developed ones. Given the little that they already have, the economic impact on institutions either through poor resource management or global economic declines is also more pronounced on higher education institutions in the developing world.

Given these realities, the discussion of quality assurance must be broadened to look at contextual issues relevant to developing countries. For example, while globalization affects higher education in all countries, as Lemaitre (2002) noted “globalization is not the same in the developing world as it is in developed countries.” For instance, in Latin America the massification of enrollment is less pronounced, students do not have adequate access to technology, and their role in the knowledge economy is often seen in terms of consumers rather than producers. Lemaitre also asserted that “developing countries are in a much more difficult position: not only do we have to assure quality, we must develop the conditions that make quality possible” (p. 36).

The temptation would be for developing countries to adopt existing models from larger, more developed systems; however, Lemaitre (2002) warned against such adoptions. She stated,

Every model is made up of a significant cluster of elements, some of which are essential to the substantive aspects of the model, others being part of the context in which those essential elements acquire meaning or are able to operate. When a model is imported, the significant cluster is broken, as the context in which those essential elements acquire meaning or are able to operate. (p. 36)

Yet, the practice of mimicry by the governments of developing nations is not uncommon.

As Kells (1999) noted,

In too many cases it is almost as if the need, politically, to establish a system, almost any system, and almost regardless of the cultural and other circumstances,

seems to have driven the policy making. The extent to which any of the factors which are obviously potentially influential have been meaningfully considered in the countries which have developed national systems is generally not known. (p. 223)

Reisberg's (2007) multi-case study in Argentina, a country which recently adopted a large-scale quality assurance scheme modeled off foreign criteria, is instructive. Reisberg conducted interviews with 30 senior administrators, deans and professors at three Argentinean universities that had undergone the self-study process and found a number of fundamental problems in the transfer of the quality assurance scheme into the Argentinean higher education system. Specifically, she noted that "when the self studies use international criteria to measure institutional performance, local problems may not get the attention that they merit while less relevant issues become priorities" (p. 293). She also came to the following conclusion based on the findings of the study:

In Argentina, an extensive evaluation program was implemented all at once without the benefit of experience or consensus. Whether the rapid implementation was the result of pressure from The World Bank or simply poor planning is impossible to know. The system outlined in the new law mimicked elements of quality assurance schemes in practice elsewhere. No allowance was made for national or institutional culture or for the lack of familiarity with this kind of program. (Reisberg, 2007, p. 281)

Lim (1999) warned that many of the conditions needed to successfully support quality assurance programs are absent in the majority of universities in developing countries. While he noted that a few *elite* institutions do exist in more advanced developing countries, he insisted that the majority of institutions in developing countries are poorly endowed, have few academic staff with formal qualifications and have poor support services. For example, academic staff usually have only a Master's degree (and in many rural areas, only a Bachelor's degree) and little research training. Low salaries

and poor working conditions also lead to the practice of moonlighting to supplement incomes.

As would be expected in poorly resourced institutions, library materials are usually outdated and there is inadequate access to technology. Physical space is often limited. Lim (1999) also claimed that in developing countries, the academic culture is more likely to be influenced by external politics and culture. According to the author, there is often less tolerance of faculty and student academic freedom, more resistance to evaluation of teachers and greater political interference in promotions than found in developed countries. Awareness of quality assurance principles is often lacking as well.

Despite the inevitable shortcomings, Lim (1999) advocated for developing countries to adopt quality assurance programs, pointing to the potential for quality improvement and economic development. Genis (2002) expressed similar sentiments in a study of South African quality assurance initiatives. She stated that “the fact that neither internal quality assurance nor external quality assurance has been perfect does not detract from the positive influence that external quality assurance has had on the education practice in technikons” (p. 68).

This does not mean that governments or higher education sectors should go blindly into quality assurance initiatives. Lim (1999) provided the following advice:

To assess the relevance of quality assurance programmes for improving the quality of universities in developing countries, three steps have to be taken. The first is to identify the conditions that must be in place for such programmes to work, the second to see if these conditions are present in the universities in developing countries, and the third to assess if the total or partial absence of these conditions render the use of quality assurance programmes ineffective. (p. 385)



Lim also suggested that quality assurance programs be modified to match conditions found in developing countries. According to the author, these modifications should focus on simple designs, modest expectations and realistic requirements.

Kells (1999) proposed a policy making model for national and other evaluation systems based on two factors- *national circumstances* and *national cultural attributes*. His ideas on national cultural attributes are based on Hofstede's four major national cultural attributes. These attributes are (a) *power distance* – “the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and *accept* power as distributed unequally;” (b) *uncertainty avoidance* – “the relative level of intolerance in society” and “the extent to which difference is seen as dangerous;” (c) *masculinity/femininity*- “extent of distinctness in gender roles in society;” and (d) *individualism/collectivism*- “extent to which ties between individuals are strong, whether loyalty to the group is strong, and whether the rights of the group outweigh the rights of individuals” (Kells, 1999, p. 225).

Kells (1999) claimed “there is a fairly strong relationship between the national cultural attributes... and the type of national evaluation system one can and should build there” (p. 229). Kells (1999) explained the rationale for his model in the following statement:

The relative influence of national circumstances and national cultural attributes is probably as follows: the circumstances affect the initial statement of purposes, the unit of analysis, the size of the evaluation scheme, the relationship to matters of national reform and whether a phased development of the system is needed. The cultural attributes probably influence the nature of the process and procedures within the system, the relative openness, whether there is flexibility in the scheme, the use of standards, indicators and, of course, the real focus or purpose of the system. (p. 230)

Kells proceeded to make several concrete recommendations for policy making depending on the range of existing national circumstances and cultural attributes.

### *Regional Approaches to Quality Assurance*

Belize is a small country on the Caribbean coast of Central America. History, culture and language have influenced closer economic and political ties with the Caribbean than with its more geographically-related Central American neighbors. One tangible piece of evidence of its connection to the Caribbean is the country's membership in the Caribbean Community (CARICOM).

CARICOM is an organization of fifteen Caribbean nations. It was established in 1973 to promote economic and political integration among member countries. Recognizing the centrality of education in such efforts, CARICOM has set out to link tertiary institutions across the region through a system of accreditation. This most recent initiative began in 1990 with the establishment of the Association of Caribbean Tertiary Institutions (ACTI). The activities of ACTI have included the coordination of tertiary education standards, the development of procedures for assessing the equivalency of qualifications and the development of a model for a regional accreditation mechanism (CARICOM, 2005). It is through this framework that Belize and several other Caribbean countries enacted accreditation legislation.

The Barbados Accreditation Council (BAC) was established in 2004. The council registers and accredits local tertiary institutions and also provides recognition and equivalency services for foreign-based qualifications. The BAC is set up to provide both program and institutional accreditation. Although registration is mandatory for all tertiary providers within the country, accreditation is voluntary (<http://www.bac.gov.bb>).

In the first few years of its existence, the BAC concentrated on developing policies and procedures for accreditation and getting feedback from tertiary institutions and professional bodies on its draft standards. The BAC also provided technical support and information to institutions through workshops, site visits and seminars. The BAC currently employs 11 staff members and has 28 registered providers (higher education institutions) none of which have completed the accreditation process (<http://www.bac.gov.bb>). Financing of the council is provided partly by the government of Barbados and partly through fees charged for services.

The Accreditation Council of Trinidad and Tobago (ACTT) was established in 2004 as well. The council's functions are similar to that of the BAC and include registration, accreditation, and recognition of foreign qualifications. It is a larger operation than the BAC with a staff of over 40 persons. The ACTT currently has 78 institutions registered and has conferred accredited status on three of them. An additional eight institutions are in the process of seeking accreditation (<http://www.actt.org.tt>).

In Trinidad and Tobago, the switch from an unregulated to a regulated system faced some resistance from institutions in its initial years (Pickford-Gordon, 2009; Rohandra, 2009). All institutions were required to register with the council; however, even after several extensions on the 2006 deadline, by July 2009, some institutions still had not complied with the requirement to register. The council was reluctant to close down non-compliant schools and instead adopted an approach of working along with those institutions to ensure compliance. Like the BAC, the ACCT concentrated its initial efforts on raising public awareness of the importance of accreditation through regular

newspaper articles, publications and presentations to high school students (CANQATE News, 2008).

Jamaica's system predates recent trends and initiatives in the Caribbean region. The University Council of Jamaica (UCJ) was established in 1987 with the purpose of assuring educational quality and institutional integrity (<http://www.ucj.org.jm>). From its inception, the UCJ took on an improvement agenda, while at the same time ensuring compliance with its mandatory registration system. UCJ has focused on program accreditation although it also has in place an institutional accreditation mechanism. The criteria are intentionally non-prescriptive to allow for differences in institutional missions. UCJ has spent much of its efforts on capacity-building within the tertiary sector and working on developing its reputation as a credible quality assurance provider. To date, the UCJ has 51 registered institutions and over 200 accredited programs in both local and overseas institutions (<http://www.ucj.org.jm>).

In spite of the UCJ's successes, Marshall's (2007) multi-case study based on Jamaican community colleges, found that institutions faced a number of significant challenges in participating in the accreditation process. In particular, she found that institutions were faced with a number of constraints when trying to implement the self-study process. These include (a) the absence of an institutional strategic plan, (b) the lack of knowledge of the self-study process, (c) problems with the collection and management of data, (d) lack of time to dedicate to self-study, and (e) issues such as fear, distrust, and resistance to change. This study may be particularly instructive for Belize given similarities in institutional conditions and culture.

In addition to the economic issues faced by developing countries, an additional constraint in much of the Caribbean, including Belize, is the issue of smallness in terms of population size and its impact on the availability of human resources. As Roberts (2003) noted “Acquiring resources to support and sustain national accreditation bodies in small countries with small tertiary systems and with competing demands from other sectors is no doubt a challenge” (p. 70). She made the following recommendation:

The questions which need to be asked particularly in settings where national accreditation bodies do not already exist will be: Is there really a need for a national accreditation body? What will be its functions? Who will be its clients? How much will it cost and who will pay? What will be its benefits to tertiary education, the country and the individual institutions? (p. 66).

These are all questions which have yet to be answered in Belize.

### ***Quality Assurance and Belizean Higher Education***

#### *Contextual Considerations*

Arguably, Belize may have as much need for an operational external quality assurance system as any other nation state. Despite the social and economic problems in the wider society and persistent issues of access, affordability, equity, and quality at the lower levels of the education system, higher education enrollment continues to grow. Enrollment in tertiary actually doubled from 3,464 students in 2004-05 to 6,972 in 2008-09 (Planning and Projects Unit, 2005; Policy and Planning Unit [PPU], 2009).

While impressive in rate of growth, the figures hardly mirror the massification experienced in the United States and Europe in earlier decades and more recently in other countries world-wide. The estimated gross enrollment ratio for Belize’s tertiary sector is relatively low at 21% compared to figures in more economically-developed nations that are typically well above 50% (<http://data.worldbank.org>). Nonetheless, if high school

enrollment continues to increase as expected and universal secondary education is eventually achieved in Belize, further interest and enrollment in higher education are inevitable. Furthermore, those students who have already earned Associate's and Bachelor's degrees will look for additional opportunities at the undergraduate and graduate levels. The capacity of local higher education institutions to respond to these increased demands, while maintaining or improving current levels of quality, will be tested.

Already, the trend of transnational education is being felt in Belize. New providers such as U.S. universities and new formats such as online and distance education programs are now part of the Belizean higher education landscape. These programs supplement the limited number of programs available from local providers. The current and anticipated growth in enrollment and the absence of a mechanism to monitor, assess or improve the quality of both local and foreign providers make a convincing case for the implementation of some type of quality assurance mechanism.

A late start in quality assurance means that there is much to learn from the successes and failures of other systems. The most useful models may be those from neighboring Caribbean states. Belize has a similar colonial history and shares a lot in common in terms of higher education development with Jamaica, Barbados, and Trinidad and Tobago (CARICOM, 2005). All four countries have enacted laws for the establishment of national accreditation councils but Belize, unlike the others, has yet to make its council operational.

There are a number of factors that may account for the difference. For example, the three other countries have much larger economies than Belize: Barbados and T&T are

classified as high income economies, Jamaica as an upper middle-income economy, and Belize as a lower middle-income economy by the World Bank (<http://data.worldbank.org>). Jamaica and T&T also have much larger populations and more expansive higher education systems from which to draw expertise. There are significant differences in the countries' education systems as well. Belize has a unique church-state (i.e. church-managed and government-financed) system which impacts greatly on the freedom of both institutions and the government to implement institutional and national policies respectively. Therefore, although there are significant historical and cultural similarities with countries in the region, the peculiarities of the Belizean context must be taken into consideration in developing a workable quality assurance system.

There has been no research addressing the quality of Belizean higher education. Little is known of the practices which institutions currently use to monitor or improve the quality of teaching, student learning or curriculum or the structures which are in place to support such processes. The overarching conceptions of quality held by institutional leaders, academic, students, and employers have not been empirically investigated. The only available indications of quality are anecdotal references to how well graduates (the few who can afford to) do in U.S. universities, the lamentations among higher education faculty of the declining quality (preparation) of high school graduates, and criticisms by employers of the poor work ethic and attitudes of graduates.

External examinations have been a major and accepted component of the education system. Students sit for the Primary School Examinations (PSE) in their final year of primary (elementary) school. In many cases, performance in this exam determines access to high school opportunities (elite, better resourced versus non-elite, poorly

resourced schools) and a parent's willingness to continue funding a child's education at the secondary level. Those schools that are able to have students rank within the top ten country-wide get recognition and prestige. Similar systems of recognition operate at the secondary and the tertiary levels.

### *Legal Framework for Quality*

The National Accreditation Council of Belize Act ([NACB Act], 2005) is the country's first attempt to legislate quality in higher education. The Act did not arise from any direct local pressure or initiative, but rather as an instrument of regional integration. The CARICOM Secretariat, with input from ACTI and the University of the West Indies developed draft legislation intended for adaptation and adoption in CARICOM states.

Among other functions, the National Accreditation Council of Belize would "grant recognition to awards obtained in Belize and elsewhere," "ensure that all programmes and courses delivered in Belize meet the academic and professional standards required," and "provide service of public information regarding publicly and privately offered post secondary education" (NACB Act, 2005, p. 745). The long-term plan is to eventually network national accreditation councils with a regional accrediting body (Roberts, 2003).

In addition to the NACB Act, the new Belize Education and Training (BET Act, 2010) sets in place mechanisms for quality assurance in some professional and technical education areas. PART VII of the BET Act establishes the Belize Board of Teacher Education (BBTE). The Act gives broad responsibilities to the BBTE for reviewing, recommending, endorsing, and approving teacher education programs, courses and services.



The Board also has a quality assurance function. It is stated in Section 25, subsection 1, that “The BBTE shall provide quality assurance of teacher education and training in Belize and shall make recommendations on teacher training and allied matters to the appropriate authorities.” The BBTE also has the authority to “recommend standards for the delivery and assessment of teacher education in institutions approved to offer teacher training programs” and to “endorse all rules, procedures and policies governing the delivery of teacher education in all institutions approved to offer teacher training programs, services and courses” (BET Act, 2010, Section 25, subsection 2).

In terms of technical and vocational education, PART IV of the BET Act establishes a National Council for Technical and Vocational Education and Training (NCTVET). Among the functions of the NCTVET are “to assist in monitoring the quality and effectiveness of technical and vocational training at the post primary, secondary, and post-secondary levels of the education system,” and “to provide advice and assistance in developing policies and procedures for granting recognition and accreditation in Belize of technical and vocational education and training qualifications granted in member countries of the Caribbean Community and other countries” (BET Act, 2010, Section 13).

The BET Act makes no mention of or reference to the NACB Act. It is thus unclear how the quality assurance functions of the BBTE and the NCTVET will relate to the role of the accreditation council. Furthermore, the accreditation council’s power to “grant recognition to awards obtained in Belize and elsewhere,” “to determine the equivalency of all awards and certificates,” and “to ensure that all programmes and courses delivered in Belize meet the academic and professional standards required” appear to be in conflict with the functions of both the BBTE and the NCTVET. There

also is no mention in the NACB Act of legislation related to professional licensing requirements such as the Nurses and Midwives Registration Act (2000) or the Professional Engineers Registration Act (2003) which could potentially result in duplication of efforts and conflicts over authority. At the minimum, there will need to be coordination of efforts to avoid duplication and confusion.

As previously mentioned, while the NACB Act (2005) provides a legal framework for external quality assurance in the form of accreditation, it leaves many issues subject to interpretation. For example, there is no guidance on what criteria will be used for registration or by what means institutions will be accredited. The report of the National Higher Education Conference (Young, 2006), showed that stakeholders held a number of contradictory assumptions and expectations regarding the purpose of the accreditation council and how it would function. Participants at the conference saw the need for an “assessment of what is on the ground regarding accreditation/ Quality Assurance” and suggested that “a comprehensive study should be done to determine what processes are in place for quality assurance” (p. 182).

### *Summary*

Several deductions can be drawn from the literature review. These include:

1. There is no one definition for higher education quality. Quality can be defined in various ways and its definition is influenced by the person who is providing the definition and his/her position in relation to the higher education system.
2. Conceptions of quality have implications for how quality is assessed. Concepts determine the focus of assessment and the methods used for evaluation.

3. There are many options to consider when choosing an external quality assurance system. These include, but are not limited to, the purpose of quality assurance (e.g. quality control, accountability, or improvement), the affiliation of the quality assurance agency (e.g. government controlled versus autonomous), the approach used (e.g. audit, assessment, or accreditation and voluntary versus compulsory), and relationship to public funding (e.g. direct funding or incentives).
4. Existing quality assurance models continue to evolve in response to criticisms from external stakeholders for greater transparency and increased attention to learning outcomes. A single model is unlikely to address the needs and expectations of all stakeholders.
5. External quality assurance is linked to internal quality assurance. It is possible for institutions to comply with accountability requirements without making significant improvements in quality; however, establishing academic structures and implementing procedures that encourage institutional learning and a culture of evaluation is important for quality improvement.
6. Aspects of institutional culture can influence the implementation of quality assurance. For example, organizational leaders' attitudes, responses and support can greatly influence the failure or success of quality initiatives.
7. Institutions in developing countries face considerable constraints in adopting the external quality assurance schemes used in developed countries. There is need to pay attention to the national conditions, cultural attributes and

institutional and systemic contexts and to modify the design, expectations and requirements of such systems as appropriate.

The aim of this study was to explore how higher education quality is defined and assessed within local Belizean higher education institutions. The research also aimed to build understanding of the contexts (internal and external) under which institutions operate and are expected to assure quality. Subsequently, these elements—concepts, practices, and contexts—were considered in light of the prospect of implementing an external quality assurance system such as that proposed by the National Accreditation Council of Belize Act (2005).

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

The purpose of this study was to explore quality assurance practices and perspectives within Belizean higher education institutions. The central question addressed was “How is quality assurance perceived and practiced within Belize’s higher education institutions?” The following sub-questions were addressed by the study:

1. How is higher education quality conceptualized within 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?

#### ***Tradition of Inquiry***

The study was based on a qualitative research design. Hatch (2002, pp. 6-11) in his summary of commonly cited sources on the topic of qualitative research, lists the following common characteristics of qualitative studies: (a) natural settings, (b) participants’ perspectives, (c) researcher as data gathering instrument, (d) extended firsthand engagement, (e) the centrality of meaning, (f) wholeness and complexity, (g) subjectivity, (h) emergent design, (i) inductive data analysis, and (j) reflexivity. The researcher sought to provide a rich description of participants’ perspectives regarding concepts of higher education quality, internal quality assurance practices, and the prospect of establishing an external quality assurance scheme in Belize. The research relied on a constructivist paradigm that regards knowledge as a “human construction,”

that recognizes “multiple realities,” and sees the research as a process through which the “researcher and the participant co-construct understandings” (Hatch, 2002, p.13).

In qualitative studies the researcher enters the research site with no explicit expectations or interest in controlling variables. No hypothesis is offered or tested. The approach is primarily inductive; pulling detailed pieces of information from one or a few cases to paint an overall picture of a context or phenomenon (Hatch, 2002). Unexpected variables are not controlled, being recognized as potential important parts of the whole. Merriam (1998) notes that the design of qualitative studies is “emergent and flexible” and also “responsive to changing conditions of the study in progress” (p. 8).

#### *Case Study Research*

There is no one accepted definition or conceptual framework for case study research. As Creswell (2007) explains, case study research can be conceptualized “as a strategy of inquiry, as a methodology or a comprehensive research strategy” (p. 73). On the other hand, Robert Stake, as quoted in Creswell (2007), regards case study research “not as a methodology, but a choice of what is to be studied” (p. 73). Yin (2009) refers to case study as “an empirical inquiry” that “investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context” (p.18). Merriam notes, “A case study design is employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved. The interest is in process rather than outcomes, in context rather than a specific variable, in discovery rather than confirmation” (p. 19).

In case studies, issues provide the conceptual structure. Stake notes that the most suitable issues for case study research are those that are “potentially problematic” and “deeply connected to the contexts of the case” (Stake, 1995, p. 19). Qualitative case

studies also treat uniqueness of individual cases and contexts as important to understanding. Therefore, there is an expectation of “thick descriptions,” “experiential understanding,” and “multiple realities.” Likewise a “holistic treatment of phenomenon” is necessary and should include consideration of various aspects of the particular context such as “temporal and spatial, historical, political, economic, cultural, social and personal” (p. 43).

#### *Multiple Case Study Research*

Multiple case studies are “commonly referred to as *collective case studies*, *cross-case*, *multicase* or *multisite studies*, or *comparative case studies*” (Merriam, 1998, p. 40).

In a collective case study “a number of cases may be studied jointly in order to investigate a phenomenon, population, or general condition” (Stake, 2005, p. 445). Stake (2006) explains the characteristics of multicase studies as follows:

The multicase study is a special effort to examine something having lots of cases, parts or members. We study those parts, perhaps its students, its committees, its projects, or manifestations in diverse settings... One small collection of people, activities, policies, strengths, problems or relationships is studied in detail. Each case to be studied has its own problems and relationships. The cases have their own stories to tell, and some of them are included in the multicase report, but the official interest is in the collection of these cases or in the phenomenon exhibited in those cases. We seek to understand better how this whole... operates in different situations. (p. vi)

In the present study, each institution was treated as a case. The phenomenon under study was quality assurance, the population was local higher education institutions in Belize, and the general condition related to contextual issues in the higher education environment. Within each individual case, the perceptions of academic leaders, internal quality assurance structures and processes, and relevant contextual issues were explored. Although there was an interest in understanding the perceptions, practices, and context of

the individual cases, the greater interest was in the patterns and trends of the overall population.

### *Sampling Method*

Both institutions and people were used as units of analysis in the study. The study invited the participation of all local higher education institutions—ten junior colleges and two universities—in Belize. Participants within approved institutions were selected through purposeful (also known as purposive) sampling. Purposeful sampling is defined by Richards and Morse (2007) as a process whereby “the investigator selects participants because of their characteristics.” Spradley (cited in Richards & Morse, 2007, p. 195) states that “Good informants/participants are those who know the information required, are willing to reflect on the phenomena of interest, have the time, and are willing to participate.”

Merriam (1998) states that “purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p. 61). She suggests that “to begin purposive sampling, you must first determine what selection criteria are essential in choosing the people or sites to be studied” (p. 61). Criteria for selecting the purposeful sample in this study were as follows:

1. Position within the institution

The researcher sought to describe the perspectives of persons fitting the description of academic leader within the local higher education system because of their potential impact on policy decisions and policy implementation.

Additional participants were considered if they had direct responsibility for some



aspect of quality assurance within a participating institution. At the time of the study, twenty-two persons fit the criterion of academic leader and one person fit the description of a person being responsible for quality assurance. These persons included five presidents, two provosts, fifteen deans and one quality assurance officer.

2. The academic leader's familiarity with the day-to-day activities of the institution

The second research question sought to describe current institutional quality assurance practices, therefore it was important, that for each institution, participants were included who were familiar with the day-to-day activities of the institution. It was assumed that persons such as presidents and provosts may not be directly involved with the day-to-day implementation of quality assurance practices at their institutions. Therefore, at institutions where presidents and provosts were invited to participate, deans were included as participants as well. Seven of the ten institutions that participated in the study were headed by deans who function as their institutions' chief executive officers, but also have direct involvement in the day-to-day quality assurance activities at their institutions.

3. The academic leader's involvement in the Association of Tertiary Level Institutions in Belize (ATLIB)

The investigator believed that the third research question would benefit from perspectives informed by a broad understanding of the higher education system and its context. ATLIB is the primary forum in Belize for interaction among higher education institutions, the Ministry of Education, and other subsectors of

the education system; therefore, it was assumed that those academic leaders who represent their institutions in ATLIB would be better able to contribute to the study because of their interaction with academic leaders from other institutions and familiarity with current system-wide issues. As a result, only those academic leaders who were members of ATLIB were approached to participate in the study. This particular criterion disqualified two presidents and one provost from participating in the study.

#### 4. The size and organizational structure of institutions

Institutions with higher enrollments and more complex organizational structures had more participants included in the study than institutions with lower enrollments and less complex organizational structures. For example, some institutions had presidents and provosts while others did not. Also, in the case of one institution, there were four academic divisions, each with its own dean and academic focus, and comparable in size to many of the other institutions where there was a single dean who oversaw all the programs of the institution.

#### 5. Ethical Considerations

One academic leader who otherwise met the criteria was disqualified because that person was temporarily serving in the post of the investigator and was expected to have a reporting relationship to the investigator on her return to work. There was an ethical concern because, if asked to participate, that person may have felt obligated to participate in the study. The researcher decided not to completely exclude her own institution from the study for two reasons: (a) the institution was the largest junior college in terms of enrollment, and (b) the establishment of the

institution predated all the other institutions included in the study. It was assumed that these factors may have given rise to unique perspectives and practices.

Therefore, an academic leader from a different academic division of the college and with whom the researcher did not have a reporting relationship was invited and agreed to participate in the study.

Merriam (1998) notes, “Within every case there exist numerous sites that could be visited...events or activities, that could be observed, people who could be interviewed, documents that could be read” (p. 65). Based on the sampling criteria, considerations discussed above, and institutional permissions received, two presidents, one provost, thirteen deans and one quality assurance officer were sent letters of invitation to participate in the study and all seventeen persons agreed to participate.

Within-site sampling of documents was needed to make the data collection and analysis relevant and manageable. Participants were asked to provide the investigator with documents that would promote understanding of the institution’s conceptions of quality and internal quality assurance structures and processes. These documents fell into the following three broad categories:

1. Manuals: e.g., student, faculty, and staff manuals and academic catalogs
2. Policies and Guidelines: e.g., academic policies and guidelines for program review, curriculum development, faculty development, and student evaluations
3. Evaluation instruments: e.g., instructor and course evaluation instruments

### *Data Collection Strategies*

#### *Entry*

The first step in data gathering was gaining access and permissions. This step allows the researcher to become familiar with people and spaces. It also allows potential actors and others to learn about the nature of the case study and specifics of the research design (Stake, 1995, p. 57). Updated names and contact information for eligible institutions and potential participants were obtained from ATLIB. A letter of request for institutional approval (see Appendix A) and a copy of the Ministry of Education's letter of endorsement (see Appendix B) were sent to each local higher education institution addressed to the person responsible for approving research. In three cases, this person was the president of the institution, in two cases it was the provost of the institution, and in seven cases it was the dean of the institution. None of the institutions had an Institutional Review Board or equivalent structure.

Ten of the twelve institutions—nine of the ten junior colleges and one of two universities—responded with letters of approval giving permission for their institutions to be included in the study. One university declined participation, stating that they were undergoing a comprehensive policy review at the time. One junior college's leadership gave verbal indication of the intent to participate but after several requests, failed to provide an official approval letter.

Once institutional approvals were obtained and approved by UNL's Institutional Review Board, potential participants were contacted by phone to inform them about the study and to request permission to send them additional information. Once permission was obtained, letters of invitation to participate (see Appendix C), a copy of the Informed

Consent Form (see Appendix D), and a Case Study Protocol (see Appendix E) were sent by regular mail and, if requested by participants, by electronic mail as well. The Informed Consent Form included the confidentiality agreement and statements explaining the obligations of the participant and the researcher. The Case Study Protocol included relevant information about the study and the initial Interview Protocol. Those participants who were not the persons responsible for providing institutional approval also received copies of the institution's approval letter and the letter of endorsement from the Ministry of Education. Follow-up correspondence was conducted via email and, where necessary, by telephone to confirm agreement to participate in the study and to schedule interviews. Data collection, analysis, and validation were conducted over a five-month period from February to June, 2011.

Three data collection strategies typically used in case study research were used in this particular study. These were (a) interviews, (b) documentation, and to a lesser extent, (c) observations. The aim of using multiple strategies was to thoroughly understand the case and to increase the validity of the findings.

### *Interviews*

Stake refers to the interview as “the main road to multiple realities” (1995, p. 64). Interviews are important in obtaining descriptions and interpretations of others which are central elements in case study research. Interviews capture the “unique experiences” and “special stories” of interviewees. The case study researcher's task is then to use this information to portray multiple views of the case (p. 65). Interviews are good sources of data for case studies because they focus directly on case study topics and provide insight into “perceived causal inferences and explanations” (Yin, 2009, p. 102).

Prior to the start of the interview, each participant was asked to sign two copies of the Informed Consent Form and they were given one copy to keep. Interviews were semi-structured and questions were open-ended. An initial interview protocol was developed using the research questions and related literature and shared with participants prior to the interview. The protocol began with questions of a general nature about the participant. This allowed participants to become more comfortable with being interviewed. General questions included: (a) What are your current roles and responsibilities at the institution? (b) How long have you been involved in higher education in Belize?

The subsequent questions were designed to address specific research questions. For example, for Research Question #1 (How is higher education quality conceptualized in Belize's higher education institutions?), interview questions and prompts attempted to identify the concept or concepts of quality from Harvey and Green's (1993a) classification that best exemplified how quality was regarded within institutions. Specific questions included,

1. Tell me about your institution; what is its mission?
2. How do you believe your institution defines quality? Is it exceptionalism, conformance to standards, fitness for purpose, value for money, transformation of students or some other definition?

To address Research Question #2 (How do Belizean institutions currently assure quality?), interview questions focused on organizational structures and three core educational processes—curriculum development and review, faculty evaluation and development and assessment of student learning. The aim was to see to what extent the

institutions resembled Dill's (1999) academic learning organization model (*culture of evidence in problem solving, coordination of teaching units, learning from others, university-wide coordination of learning and transferring knowledge*) in their level of organizational structure and basic operations. Specific questions included,

1. How does your institution develop and review courses and programs?
2. How does your institution evaluate faculty and support their professional development?
3. How does your institution assess and support student learning?
4. What constraints do you encounter in trying to assure quality?

In addressing Research Question #3 (How do academic leaders regard the proposed implementation of an external quality assurance system?), questions and prompts were designed based on the IIEP's (2007a; 2007b) major organizational choices for external quality assurance systems (purposes, affiliation, general approaches, and links to public funding). Specific questions included,

1. How important do you think it is for Belize to establish an external quality assurance system?
2. If a system were to be put in place, what do you think the purpose/emphasis should be—accountability, quality control, quality improvement or some other purpose?
3. If an external quality assurance system were to be put in place, what are your hopes for how such a system would function? Who should be responsible for the system? Should participation be compulsory or voluntary and for which type of institutions? Should results be tied to public funding or not?

4. What challenges do you foresee in trying to implement an external quality assurance system in Belize?

#### *Pilot Interview*

Merriam (1998) advises that

Pilot interviews are crucial for trying out your questions. Not only do you get some practice in interviewing, you also quickly learn which questions are confusing and need rewording, which questions yield useful data, and which questions, suggested by your respondents, you should have thought to include in the first place. (p. 76)

A pilot interview was conducted prior to the start of official data collection. The participant for the pilot interview was selected from an institution where more than one participant was included. Following the interview, the pilot participant was asked to provide feedback on the quality and relevance of the questions and the interview process. The participant's suggestions were combined with the researcher's own observations and reflections and used to improve the interview protocol and overall interview process. The following is a description of the changes that were made.

At the start of the pilot interview, the participant reported that she did not get a chance to read the Case Study Protocol. Consequently, in addition to reviewing the Informed Consent Form, the researcher also reviewed the Case Study Protocol with participants prior to the start of each interview. Particular attention was given to explaining the definitions for quality assurance, internal quality assurance, and external quality assurance. This was followed by a brief explanation of how prior research on quality assurance was used to arrive at the major research questions for the study (i.e., the need to define quality and how definitions of quality relate to how quality can be assessed, the need to ascertain what quality assurance structures and practices are in place



within institutions prior to implementing external quality assurance, and the importance of taking the institutional leaders' perceptions into consideration when designing an external quality assurance system). The major theoretical constructs such as Harvey and Green's (1993a) categories of quality were reviewed as well. This process added an additional 15 to 20 minutes to the process but was necessary to ensure that participants understood the major concepts as well as the rationale for the study.

The pilot participant suggested the inclusion of more breaks after questions to make sure that participants fully answered the question. As a result, in subsequent interviews, at the end of each section of the interview, the researcher summarized the participant's responses to the question and provided the participant with the opportunity to make additional comments or to correct the researcher's interpretations before moving on to the next question.

Based on the pilot interview and the researcher's own reflections, several questions on the protocol were reworded to create a more natural conversational flow to the interview. More theory-related prompts were added as well. For example, the question, what concept of quality is prevalent at the institution, was followed up with a review of the Harvey and Green constructs and when asking the question, what do you think should be the purpose of external quality assurance, options such as quality control, accountability, improvement or other purposes were provided with a brief explanation of each option.

Additional changes to the protocol were made as the interviews progressed. Based on the responses from participants, some issues gained higher prominence and became a larger part of the study than originally intended. One such issue was whether the external

quality assurance system should be local or regional. It was an issue that participants appeared passionate about. On the other hand, other questions received less attention over time. For example, one of the common follow-up questions to how the system would function was whether participants believed the results of evaluations should be made public or kept private. The researcher sensed that some participants were uncomfortable with that question and so it eventually was left out of the interviews. A copy of the Revised Interview Protocol can be found in Appendix F.

Overall, the pilot interview was a success. The participant appeared to contemplate each question carefully and responded based on her knowledge of and experience in the Belizean higher education system. She spoke positively about the flow of topics and the researcher's use of her responses to build on subsequent questions. The participant also commented that she found the topic of the study relevant and timely and thanked the researcher for conducting the study. These sentiments were later shared by many of the participants.

The length of interviews ranged from a little under one hour to over three hours. The duration of interviews was influenced by factors such as the participants' conversational style, number of years in higher education, and interest in and knowledge of the topic. All interviews were conducted on-site at the participants' institutions. They were audio-taped, with the permission of the participants, and later transcribed by the researcher.

#### *Documentation*

The strengths of documentation as a source of data lie in its stability, unobtrusiveness, exactness, and broad coverage (Yin, 2009, p. 102). According to Stake

(1995), “Quite often, documents serve as substitutes for records of activity that the researcher could not observe directly” (p.68). Merriam (1998) adds, “Many documents are easily accessible, free, and contain information that would take an investigator enormous time and effort to gather otherwise” (p. 125). In this study, documents such as manuals, guidelines, and self-evaluation instruments provided insight into institutional processes which could not be observed directly by the researcher. Additionally, as Yin (2009) notes, “For case studies, the most important use of documents is to corroborate and augment evidence from other sources” (p. 103). In this particular multi-case study, documents were used to corroborate and augment interview responses related to institutional purpose, concepts of quality, and internal quality structures and processes. A list and description of the documents collected and reviewed for this study can be found in Appendix G.

### *Observations*

Stake (2005) notes that “activities are expected to be influenced by contexts, so contexts need to be described, even if evidence of influence is not found” (p. 453). Observations can be used to gather data specific to both the case and the issues in questions. Stake (1995, p. 60) suggests that observations focus only on a few aspects and that opportunities for observations be identified partly by issues. He makes particular note, too, that the physical situation should be well-described (p. 63). All interviews were conducted on-site and visits included a tour of facilities. This allowed the researcher to observe the institution’s physical infrastructure and to develop general impressions of the institutional culture and setting, as well as that of the surrounding local communities. The researcher recorded observations and reflections after each site visit.

Three institutions were visited once and seven institutions were visited multiple times. The number of times each site was visited depended on the size of the institution and the number of participants to be interviewed. The small geographic spread of institutions made physical access relatively easy. Two sites were within twenty minutes of the researcher's home; all other sites were accessible within one and two and one-half hours via private or public transportation. A maximum of two sites were visited per week. The initial site visits typically included formal in-depth interviews with participants, collection of institutional documents from participants, and an observational site tour. Subsequent visits were normally to collect feedback on site reports and transcripts or additional documents. In instances where participants mailed in their feedback to the researcher, only one site visit was conducted.

### *Data Analysis Strategies*

According to Stake (1995), "There is no particular moment when data analysis begins. Analysis is a matter of giving meaning to first impressions as well as to final compilations" (p. 71). Textual data are typically reviewed with predetermined issues and variables in mind or what Stake refers to as *etic* issues. The interview transcripts, documents and observations in this study were analyzed for descriptions and patterns related to three primary areas: (a) conceptual issues (definitions of quality, purposes of higher education, relevance, purpose, and mechanisms of external quality assurance); (b) descriptions of structures and processes used to monitor, assess, or improve quality (specifically in reference to curriculum and programs, student learning, teaching practices and decision-making processes); and (c) contextual issues (internal and external factors that impact on quality assurance).

After each initial site visit, interviews were transcribed, documents were reviewed and a site report was drafted. Where possible, time was scheduled between site visits to allow for transcriptions, document review and preliminary analysis on one site before moving on to new sites. This was done to reduce the possibility of confusing reflections and observations from different sites and also to build on what was learned at earlier sites. The data analysis software ATLAS.ti was used to help manage and code the data based on the analytic framework for the study. Electronic documents were loaded into the software for review, coding and analysis. Transcriptions of interviews, document reviews, and analysis of data were performed as soon as possible after each site visit.

The following theoretical constructs were used to frame the initial data analysis:

1. Harvey and Green's (1993a) conceptual framework for definitions of higher education quality;
2. Dill's (1999) characteristics of academic learning organizations;
3. IIEP's (2007a; 2007b) major organizational choices for External Quality Assurance systems; and
4. Gates et al., (2002) contextual factors in choosing the right model of quality assessment.

A summary of these categories and codes is included in Appendix H.

Stake (1995) advises that the reviewer must also be "open for unexpected clues" (p. 68). Therefore, in addition to the theoretical analytic framework, care was taken during analysis to look for *emic* issues and codes which normally emerge from inside the case as the study evolves (p. 20). Stake (1995) proposes two strategic ways to analyze cases: (a) direct interpretation of the individual instance and (b) aggregation of instances

(p. 74). Both strategies were used in this multi-case study. Direct interpretation was used in analyzing data from individual sites to get an understanding of the conceptual and contextual issues in operation there. This was followed by cross-case synthesis through aggregation of instances (perceptions, structures, processes, contexts) across sites to “tease out relationships,” “probe issues” and “aggregate categorical data” (Stake, 1995, p.77).

The final stage of analysis was synthesis of the major patterns and themes to gauge their applicability to theory and to generate recommendations related to the study. The overall framework for data analysis can be found in Appendix I.

### ***Validity and Reliability***

Specific strategies that were used to enhance the validity and reliability of the study are described below:

#### ***Triangulation***

Triangulation (confirmation) of data is an important validating strategy used in case study research. Stake (1995) suggests that data fitting the following descriptions be targeted for triangulation: (a) important data and claims, (b) dubious and contested descriptions, (c) data critical to an assertion, and (d) key interpretations. Several types of triangulation were used in the study.

1. *Methodological triangulation*. This is the use of multiple approaches within a single study. Use of multiple sources of data contributes specifically to *construct validity*, which Yin (2009) refers to as “identifying correct operational measures for the concepts being studied” (p. 40). According to Yin (2009), *construct validity* is addressed when “multiple sources of

evidence essentially provide multiple measures of the same phenomenon” (pp. 116-117). The use of interviews, documentation, and observations in this study allowed for methodological triangulation on several of the primary research questions posed.

2. *Data source triangulation.* According to Stake (1995), *data source triangulation* is used “to see if what we are observing and reporting carries the same meaning when found under different circumstance” (p. 113).

Triangulation, as it applies to case studies, is not focused on confirmation of a single meaning but rather the search for additional interpretations. The multi-case strategy used in this research allowed for data source triangulation since the same research questions were investigated in each individual case.

#### *Member Checks*

Stake (1995) describes “member checking” as an important component of case study designs. In this practice, actors review rough drafts of writing for “accuracy and palatability” (p. 115). Merriam (1998) describes member checks as “taking data and tentative interpretations back to the people from whom they were derived and asking them if the results are plausible” (p. 204). Each participant was given a hard copy of the transcript of his or her interview, as well as a site report. Participants were asked to provide feedback on the “accuracy and palatability” of their interview transcripts and site reports, including quotes derived from their individual interview. Sixteen of the seventeen participants returned their transcripts and case reports with feedback or comments on the accuracy of the data. This information was used to correct or add to the data as appropriate.

### *Clarifying Researcher's Bias*

Past experiences and orientations which likely shaped the researcher's interpretation of and approach to the study are described in the report.

Yin (2009) notes that "the goal of reliability is to minimize the errors and biases in a study" (p. 45). Two ways in which reliability of the study were increased are described below:

### *Creating a Case Study Database*

Yin (2009) suggests that "a case study database markedly increases the *reliability* of the entire case study" (p. 119). He suggests that such a database include (a) case study notes from interviews, observations, and document analysis, (b) case study documents and an annotated bibliography of what is collected, (c) tabular materials such as counts of various phenomena, and (d) narratives produced upon completion of all data collection. Each of these elements was included in the case study database.

### *Audit Trail*

Another strategy to increase reliability of a study is to maintain a clear chain of evidence from case study questions to the case study report. Yin (2009) notes that this principle is "to allow an external observer—in this situation, the reader of the case study—to follow the derivation of any evidence from initial research questions to ultimate case study conclusions" (p. 122). In this study, the analysis process relied on the participants' own words and document texts (rich, thick descriptions) to identify and justify patterns, relationships, and generalizations. Stake (1995) emphasizes the need for the case study researcher to provide opportunities for vicarious experience to assist in readers' naturalistic generalizations. He defines naturalistic generalizations as



“conclusions arrived at through personal engagement in life’s affairs or by vicarious experience so well constructed that the person feels as if it happened to themselves” (p. 85). Strategies used to accomplish this task include narrative accounts, chronological presentations, personalistic descriptions and emphasis on time and place (p. 87). Consequently, the format of the report draws heavily on direct quotations from participants and documents. (Code: T#- transcript number; LINE-line on transcript where quotation started)

### *Ethical Issues*

Qualitative case study research is described by Stake (1995) as having “substantial ethical risks” (p. 45). He noted *privacy* and *entrapment* as particular risks. Interviews and observations are especially intrusive strategies. They place researchers in a situation where they have access to the personal views and private behaviors of others. There is the potential for entrapment, for example, when institutions or supervisors provide permission to conduct the study and actors feel obligated to comply with requests. The reliance on thick descriptions and multiple realities also presents some ethical issues. Care must be taken to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of persons and to avoid the associated risks of including direct quotes and detailed descriptions in reports. Also, situations in which differences in perspectives between various actors or the audience of the report can have unintended negative consequences must be monitored carefully.

Participants in this study were assured confidentiality. Participants had an opportunity to review quotes which the researcher intended to include in the final report and had an opportunity to provide feedback to the researcher on any information which

they believed may in some way identify them. No names or pseudonyms were included that could potentially be used to trace specific comments back to participants. The findings from interviews were reported in an anonymous fashion and personally identifiable information was removed during the editing process. The names of participating institutions also were not included in the study. These strategies were intended to create an environment in which participants felt free to express themselves without fear of being judged for their views.

### ***Role of the Researcher***

Creswell (2007) indicates that five philosophical assumptions, namely, *ontological, epistemological, axiological, rhetorical and methodological*, lead an individual to choose qualitative research. These assumptions are based on the individual's beliefs about the nature of reality, the relationship between the researcher and that being researched, the role of values in research, the language of research, and the process of research (pp. 15-17).

The researcher's paradigmatic orientation is similar to what Creswell describes as pragmatism. Creswell (2007) notes that pragmatists are "individuals who focus on the outcomes of research" and who "focus on the practical implications of the research." The pragmatist's orientation is towards finding solutions to problems. Since different problems call for different solutions, the pragmatist is not committed to "any one system of philosophy and reality" but accepts that "research always occurs in social, historical, political and other contexts" (pp. 22-23).

This particular worldview most likely developed from early influences such as being the first born child in a large family with few resources, growing up in a

developing country, experiences as a student leader, and from the researcher's eighteen years as a higher education educator and administrator in Belize. Successfully navigating through such experiences requires an orientation towards problem-solving. The researcher's particular interest in the topic of quality assurance likely arose from experiences as a student and administrator in an un-accredited tertiary education system, her personal interest in assessment and quality assurance, and desire to contribute to the development of Belize. It is within this context that this particular research was undertaken.

At the time of the reporting of this study, the researcher had returned to her post as Dean of the junior college division of St. John's College after having taken two years study leave to prepare for and conduct the study. She had held the post of dean since August of 2005, prior to which she was an Assistant Dean and Biology lecturer at the same college. Additionally, she was elected and served as Vice-chair of ATLIB from September 2006 to August 2008. Through ATLIB she sat in meetings and worked on various committees alongside most of the participants in the study. She maintained professional and cordial relationships with members of the association and believed that she was viewed as someone who was honest, fair and trustworthy, having represented the organization's concerns on a number of issues over the years. She also believed that her knowledge of the context, i.e., historical, cultural, and professional, placed her in a unique position to understand and interpret the meaning that participants provided in interviews.

All the same, the researcher was mindful that her interpretation must be driven by the data and not by her own beliefs and perceptions. At the start of the study her views on

many of the issues remained in flux and she had no particular expectations of how participants would respond to the questions since this was not a topic that had been discussed in any detail by ATLIB. What she did believe from the start of the study was that, as a higher education system, quality needed to be defined, institutions needed to set up systems to assess monitor and promote quality, and policy-makers needed to involve stakeholders in determining whatever process was chosen for external quality assurance. Therefore, she was open to exploring the perspectives and rationales of participants in order to further develop her own views on the issues.

## Chapter 4: Data Presentation, Interpretation, and Analysis

### *Research Question #1—Concepts of Quality*

How is higher education quality conceptualized in Belize's higher education institutions?

#### *The Traditional Pursuit of Quality*

Although one might argue that Belizean higher education is exclusive and elitist by the mere fact of its low participation rate and historical basis in the British education system, the data from interviews, institutional documents, and observations did not support such a view. What was found was not a selective system with exceedingly high entry requirements or wide disparities in cost between various institutions; rather, what became apparent was a system that was slowly redefining its identity, purpose, and definition of quality in response to changing socioeconomic and demographic factors. This is not to say that traditional views on quality were not apparent in the data. On the contrary, such traditional ideas as excellence and having exceedingly high standards, what Harvey and Green (1993b) define as exclusive quality, appeared to be deeply entrenched in some parts of the system.

For example, one participant noted, "I think as an institution, the thrust is more towards defining quality based on standards and being exceptional, the need for excellence in everything. That's certainly a push." (T#4:LINE54). The institution's academic bulletin gave support to this view with the statement that "an institution of higher education provides its greatest service when it promotes academic excellence on all levels." Likewise, documents from other institutions included statements such as "We strive for excellence," "committed to excellence in higher education, research and service

for national development,” “rigour and excellence in learning, research and service,” and “providing quality education through excellence in personnel, programs and facilities.”

The findings indicate that Belizean higher education institutions pursue excellence and recognition in two major ways, the most common of which is through student achievement on external examinations. The Caribbean Advanced Proficiency Examination (CAPE) is the common channel pursued. CAPE is an examination administered through the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC) and is taken by students across the English-speaking Caribbean. The top performer in CAPE is awarded the Belize Scholarship. The scholarship, formerly called the Open Scholarship, was established in 1944 at a time when local higher education institutions did not exist. The scholarship afforded one Belizean the opportunity to study internationally for a degree that would otherwise be inaccessible. Today, even though access to higher education has greatly improved, the scholarship remains a great honor for the recipient and a sign of prestige for his or her institution. One participant explained the benefits of even coming close to fielding the Belize Scholarship winner as follows:

The external assessment helps us to evaluate ourselves because when you are starting at the bottom, you do not have that reputation or strong foundation and so basically even your own people don't know what you are doing or they don't recognize it, but when the external agency announced that the second ranking student came from this institution, it made people look at that institution and say, “You must be doing something good,” which will transfer into financial benefits for classrooms, computers, et cetera. (T#10:LINE41)

In addition to vying for the Belize Scholarship and the prestige associated with that prize, several participants noted that they use CAPE to compare their institution's quality to that of other institutions. One participant explained, “...if the students from those three schools have earned Grade I or Grade II, then there is some commonality,

similarity [in] the quality of what they offer” (T#10:LINE920). Similarly, another participant stated, “We do encourage our students to do the CAPE exam because you want to know that the output, what they’re ending up with, is such that they can measure up to students from other institutions” (T#12:LINE94).

Another use of CAPE is for matriculation from junior colleges into the regional university system. The University of the West Indies (UWI), a popular option for Belizeans pursuing degrees in law, engineering and medicine, uses CAPE results in its entrance requirements. Students who do well on the exams increase their chances of entry and advanced placement in some programs.

Nevertheless, the limitations of CAPE, and by extension the Belize Scholarship, as a measure of quality were acknowledged by several participants. For example, a participant from one of the institutions that have fielded a Belize Scholarship winner commented,

The Belize Scholarship is not really a measure of the overall quality of an institution. There’re a lot of other things that must be considered. That is just one aspect; there’re many other aspects. How many students actually sit CAPE compared to the entire population that you have? A very small percentage, so how could you rely on just a representation of the entire student population to say that this is quality? No, I don’t think the Belize Scholarship is or should be used as the real test for excellence or quality. (T#15:LINE619)

Another participant echoed the same sentiments when she made the following statement:

It is a sign of prestige if the few students who sign up to do external exams do so well that your school can be labeled a high achieving school. So if I have a hundred persons sitting CAPE and doing excellently, when people pick up the statistics and look at it and say ‘This is a wonderful school,’ they don’t realize that 100 persons sat the exams, but in the final year there were 350 people. What happened to the other 250? (T#4:LINE402)

It is notable that since the formal establishment of tertiary education institutions in the 1960's, only four of the now existing higher education institutions have ever fielded a Belize Scholarship winner or second place finisher. The majority of institutions simply do not offer instruction in the number of syllabuses needed to compete for the scholarship. Thus students who are serious about competing for the scholarship or gaining entry into UWI select one of the institutions with known success in preparing students for the exams. For the majority of students who matriculate to local universities, there is no real incentive for participating in CAPE. As a result, some Belizean higher education institutions place no emphasis on external examinations.

A more recent strategy for pursuing excellence is for institutions to adopt externally-derived standards. Although none of the local institutions were accredited at the time of the study, some institutions tried to align themselves with the standards of institutions or systems thought to be of higher quality. For example, a participant from one such institution stated, "To me, quality is [making] sure we are delivering the programs that meet standards that are universally accepted" (T#2:LINE44). Another participant said,

I think for better or for worse, if you use world-class standards... we can't go wrong. We have to be careful of the cultural nuances of their standards but once we take account of that, those standards are solid and even if we never apply to SACS for accreditation, those standards will serve us well. (T#13:LINE816)

Due to the limitations of CAPE and the difficulty of meeting standards such as SACS, participants often use more informal ways to judge for themselves whether or not their institutions are achieving excellence or measuring up in terms of external standards. One participant explained, "Students getting accepted into a higher education institution and having the credits transfer, that means we are meeting standards that are being set by



the administration of another institution abroad.” He continued, “If the students have a foundation and can excel when they go up there, I think we have quality and that’s the feedback I’m getting from students that have gone to universities from here”

(T#11:LINE147).

*The Emergence of Newer Quality Concepts*

While the concepts of quality as excellence and having high standards appear to be deeply entrenched, contextual issues such as the expansion of higher education opportunities have created the need for more flexibility on the part of institutions, both old and new, in the way they perceive quality. This transition was explained by one participant as follows:

While the school still aspires to have the Open Scholarship won by one of its graduates, over the last few years, there is certainly a broadening of access to tertiary education and with that broadening you have to redefine what you’re doing because your clients have changed....If you are going to meet students where they are and take them to as far as you can, you have to ensure that the people who are providing the service are up to par, are excellent in what they do, and that the program they are enrolled in will meet their needs and the needs of the wider Belizean society. So broadening access, I think, definitely is an impetus to focus more closely on what you’re doing and how you’re doing it. If you don’t do that, then you run the risk of disenfranchising quite a substantial part of the clients we say we’re serving...and we don’t get to be excellent by only working with students who are academically excellent as well. (T#4:LINE100)

This shift from traditional concepts of quality (excellence and high standards) to emerging concepts of quality (fitness and transformation) was evident in many of the institutions. It was clear that participants saw it necessary to start incorporating ideas such as “fitness for purpose” and “fitness of purpose” (Harvey & Green, 1993b) into what they do. One participant explained how his institution was paying greater attention to physical infrastructure. He said,

We started looking at the quality of our Biology labs, our Chemistry labs, the equipment, [and] materials. All of these things became very important because you can't run a program unless you have the support service[s] that go along with it. That meant a lot of investment and so we have been putting a lot of our funds [in]to [making] sure that we get or we provide the best for whatever program we offer. (T#15:LINE247)

Regarding students as customers and opening up institutions to the purview of others outside of official academia also seem to be catching on. One participant stated that the focus of the institution is supposed to be “for our students so that we give them the best service possible” (T#17:LINE76). Another participant stated, “The perception of quality has, in my view, a lot to do with not just how we see ourselves, but it's a combination of how we see ourselves and how our stakeholders see us in terms of our graduates” (T#13:LINE800). That same opinion was echoed in the following statement from a different participant:

The point I'm trying to make is to determine what is quality from our end users, from our stakeholders, such as employers, and then come back and try to incorporate elements of it to meet that particular standard... For me quality has to do with the end result, the end product, them being able to perform. (T#16:LINE413)

One participant explained, “We're not really jumping into the CAPE because then you enslave yourself for more academic excellence. We would rather the hotel have more customers that say, ‘Thank you, thank the junior college’...” (T#9:LINE174). Another participant said,

I look at quality as the end product... for our Education programs, “Are they equipped to function adequately in Belizean schools?” For other programs that are not Education the other question is, “Are we preparing them to take up permanent positions and to be to have the wherewithal to be able to secure a job, not only in Belize but elsewhere? Once they're finished with their Bachelor's, do they have enough within the Bachelor's to continue with higher education?” (T#14:LINE404)

These sentiments were supported in several documents from different institutions. For example, statements on the mission and purpose of the institutions included phrases such as “a spring board to further studies,” “the quality of graduates as productive citizens,” “prepare students for professional life,” and “to become functional individuals in the workplace.”

The idea that quality education involves the extent to which the educational experience enhances or empowers (or in other words, transforms) students (Harvey & Green, 1993b) was evident as well. In addition to preparing students for further study and employment, the idea of graduating students that are able to be self-starters and entrepreneurs was also discussed. One participant explained, “If a student can leave here and go open his or her own business and that business sustains itself over a period of time, to me, that is quality” (T#16:LINE431). A participant from a different institution similarly commented,

When the institution was established, one of the speakers at the opening ceremony challenged the school to educate young people who would create employment, not expect a job to be given. That, I think, is an important value that we should look for in a quality educational program. (T#5:LINE81)

The focus on transforming students is not only on utilitarian objectives. One participant explained how she believes her institution empowered students to improve their lives. “I think that a lot of emphasis is placed on transforming students here....When the person started our school they held the post of messenger, now they hold the post of teacher educator....and we played a key role in that” (T#1:LINE54). Speaking in reference to her own institution’s lean towards exceptionalism, one participant noted,

I also consider excellence those people who will only earn C’s at their maximum, but that’s what they do at great effort. For them that’s excellence and I know that that doesn’t fit the traditional definition of it, of being exceptional, but if we can

define it as providing a service that will allow people to be the best that they can be; that I would qualify as true excellence. (T#4:LINE92)

The relationship between quality and enhancing students' skills or attitudes was mentioned by other participants as well. For example, one participant stated,

I want to feel that we've achieved good quality when you see the transformation between the first year students and the third year students...It's a change in not just having more knowledge, but in the attitude of the students that you see between first year and third year. (T#12:LINE51)

Another participant from a different institution stated,

I believe, besides the quality courses, the student has to be well-rounded, service-oriented and [have] a love for the community, for his peers and everybody else and [know] how to use what they're learning here to help the community and themselves, of course. (T#6:LINE56)

Institutional documents were filled with similar ideas. The mission and purpose statements of various institutions included phrases such as "to aid personal growth through education," "support for students to pursue personal and professional goals," "meet personal and national development needs," "self and societal advancement," "to develop the total person," and "contribute to their personal development, to their active participation in their community and to the development of Belize." There were, in some cases, moral, spiritual, and religious aspects to the idea of educational transformation as well. For example, some phrases such as "strengthening of the moral fiber of the youth," "to develop good moral character," "wholesome development of the mental, spiritual and physical needs of its students," and "development of the person's intellectual, social, moral, emotional, spiritual, and physical well-being" were found in institutional literature. More overtly religious phrases such as "to experience fulfillment with God," "to establish a relationship with God," and "to develop a life of faith in God" were present as well.

In summary, there is no discernible difference in the way participants from different types of institutions view quality. Furthermore, no single participant, and by extension, no single institution, expressed a solitary definition for quality. As one participant noted, “The definitions will vary depending on the situation.....you met certain standards.....showed a behavioral change...known for certain things.... other success indicators” (T#7:LINE489). Another participant said, “I think that there is great value in looking at as many dimensions of quality to assess what you’re doing” (T#4:LINE730).

### ***Research Question #2—Internal Quality Assurance Strategies***

How do Belizean institutions currently assure (assess, monitor, improve) quality?

#### *Size Matters*

Dill (1999) contends that institutions must become academic learning organizations if they are to participate meaningfully in external quality assurance. The findings show no evidence of fully developed academic learning organizations; however, the data provides evidence of the potential for development of an academic learning system.

More than institution age, type, or location, size seems to be the defining factor when it comes to academic coordination and practices within Belizean higher education institutions. Larger institutions had more administrators and the roles of administrators within those institutions were more delineated than those in institutions with smaller enrollments. As Table 1 below shows, the levels of academic administration also varied according to the size of student enrollment.

**Table 1: Academic Coordination Models**

<b>Model I</b>	<b>Model II</b>	<b>Model III</b>	<b>Model IV</b>	<b>Model V</b>	<b>Model VI</b>
Enrollment >1000	Enrollment >1000	Enrollment 450-999	Enrollment 300-449	Enrollment 300-449	Enrollment <300
Provost	Provost				
Multiple Deans	Multiple Deans	Single Dean	Single Dean	Single Dean	Single Dean
	Multiple Assistant Deans	Multiple Assistant Deans	Single Assistant Dean	Single Assistant Dean	
Department Chairpersons	Department Chairpersons	Department Chairpersons	Department Chairpersons		
Program Coordinators					Program Coordinators

*Source: Interviews and Institutional Documents*

The two largest institutions had four levels of academic administration: Level 1—a provost acting as the chief academic officer, Level 2—deans in charge of a grouping of academic fields, Level 3—academic chairpersons in charge of a few interrelated disciplines, and Level 4—program coordinators or program leaders in charge of specific academic programs. Academic chairpersons, also called heads of departments in some institutions, played a central institutional role in academic coordination. As one dean explained:

The academic chairpersons or heads of department are extensions of the administration and they play a very, very important role in terms of teacher supervision, their work with the curriculum, their involvement with the students, advising, feedback, scheduling, the whole lot; so they are very important people. They also assist tremendously with whatever quality assurance procedures that might be in place. (T#4:LINE146)

In institutions with larger enrollments, departments also had the assistance of several persons in charge of specific programs within the department. One dean explained the

importance of this group as follows:

We have many programs that run from the departments so sometimes it's overwhelming for the Chair to control a lot of things at the program level, so we choose a key person in the program. We call the person the Program Leader. (T#2:LINE97)

The typical medium-sized institution had three levels of academic coordination. The dean served as the chief administrative and academic officer and was supported by one or two assistant deans. Where there were two assistant deans, one was in charge of academic affairs and the other was in charge of student affairs. Where there was one assistant dean, it was typical that the assistant dean handled mostly student affairs matters while the dean retained much of the responsibility for academic programs. This was especially so in cases where there was no formal division of faculty into academic departments.

Institutions with the smallest enrollments were headed by deans and most had no assistant deans or academic chairpersons in place; however, in some cases, efforts were made to better coordinate academic programs by giving one or two faculty members some degree of responsibility over broad academic fields. For example, at one institution, a participant explained, "The courses we offer are now organized into clusters and we have one member of staff that acts as a course coordinator" (T#1:LINE113). The major reason cited for the absence of more complex organizational structures was size. As one dean commented, "The size of the institution...does not permit us to branch off easily from an administrative and logistical point of view" (T#7:LINE71). In cases where smaller institutions did attempt to coordinate academic divisions, this occurred more on paper than in reality. As one dean explained:

We have people who act as Head of Department because that's a term and a

vacancy and a position that should exist, except where I only have one English teacher, well that person is Head of Department for English too....for years I had only one Math teacher, so that person is Head of Department which tells you there's a lack of personnel, but the lack is because our population size dictated the number of classes that we will have and if we only have one Math teacher, I cannot tell government that we will pay that person as Head of Department because there're also rules that exist on how many teachers should be in the department. (T#10:LINE331)

Quality assurance, particularly the responsibility for monitoring quality, appears to lie in the hands of provosts, deans, assistant deans, or academic chairs. This is in addition to their many other responsibilities. Few guiding documents or administrative structures related to quality assurance were found within the institutions studied. Only the largest of the institutions had a specific office and personnel dedicated solely to quality assurance; however, even at that institution, quality assurance remained the responsibility of academic administrators. As one participant from that institution explained,

We insist that the dean is responsible for program evaluation. The Quality Assurance Office is not responsible. Personnel in the Quality Assurance Office help, facilitate, and develop a lot of the instruments and the manual, but that is not the office that will specifically be held accountable for the actual evaluation.... it's the faculty who plans their programs, the faculty who delivers their programs, the faculty who evaluates their programs. (T#13:LINE60)

The Quality Assurance Office was considered understaffed at the time of the study but there were plans to increase staffing, as explained by the participant below:

For many years the Quality Assurance Office has been a one-person office with minimal secretarial support. This year we anticipate that we're going to have at least two persons in there and we want to move it...at least to four persons to be looking at the four areas, for example, the Director to provide guidance and oversight for the entire program but somebody versed in curriculum and instruction, measurement and evaluation, and program development to help in terms of quality across the institution; that's planned. (T#3:LINE284)



The larger institutions had developed academic councils and committees for institution-wide coordination and decision-making on quality assurance matters. For example, at one institution,

There is an Academic Council for the institution where all the Deans and the Directors and the Provost meet. The Provost is the Chair of the Council. Any policy change or any change we make for graduation requirements or even exemptions for certain courses go through that body. (T#2:LINE113)

At another institution,

The Academic Affairs Council is made of the provost, the deans, the academic chairpersons, program coordinators, and a representative from one of the resource centers...When the Academic Affairs Council considers a proposal, if it is okayed, it would be forwarded to the Office of the Provost who is in charge of ensuring that it is considered by that other body, the Education and Policy Council. That's a standard committee of the Board...The Education and Policy Committee has a number of subcommittees...there's a subcommittee that deals with academic programs and policy, there's another one that looks at student development, [and] another one that looks at human resource management issues...When the Education and Policy Council receives proposals, they would forward it to the relevant subcommittee for consideration. There is a general meeting, discussion online, et cetera. It is [then] returned to the Education and Policy Council for final ratification and then forwarded to the Office of the President for his final nod. (T#4:LINE130)

At a third institution:

One of the things that we are doing at the Board level is that we have the Board divided into subcommittees and there's an Academic and Student Affairs Subcommittee. The role of that subcommittee is to approve all policies and programs related to Academic Affairs and Student Affairs. Right now we're doing a policy review and that includes, for the junior college, an academic policy review and a student affairs policy review, and that's being done at both divisions of the school. That committee ultimately will review programs, ensure that they meet established guidelines... so any program that is developed or any program where there's been a program revision will ultimately come to that body; that body will review it and then recommend it to the Board for passing. (T#5:LINE196)

Regardless of the size of an institution and its level of organization, higher education institutions are expected to engage in certain basic academic activities as part

of their quality assurance efforts. These include developing new curricula, reviewing existing ones, evaluating faculty, and providing opportunities for professional development; however, only a few of the institutions were found to have any formal policies or guidelines in place for these various activities and in most cases they were newly developed and in the early stages of implementation.

For example, only two of the ten institutions in the study had written policies in place for curriculum review and development. Descriptions of these cases can be found in Appendix J. On the other hand, all institutions had some process in place for evaluating faculty. These tended to be more formal and complex in larger institutions and more informal and straightforward in the smallest ones. Processes typically included student evaluations of faculty coupled with other practices such as classroom observations. Many institutions also provided opportunities for the professional development of faculty. The case studies from institutions with more formal processes can be found in Appendix K. These case studies provide insight into the mechanisms in place at the selected institutions as described in the participants' own words.

Overall, features of academic learning organizations such as the coordination of teaching units into departments, institution-wide coordination of learning by academic committees, and structures dedicated specifically to institutional assessment, which Dill (1999) reported are crucial for institutions participating in external quality assurance, were found only at institutions with the largest enrollments and within those institutions, implementation was only to a limited extent. Smaller institutions were more likely to have no official academic departments, single teachers responsible for particular subject areas, and single administrators responsible for quality assurance. Across the system,

institutions used a wide variety of formal and informal methods for developing curriculum and evaluating faculty. Furthermore, the processes used were rarely documented or supported by official policy.

*From Borrowing to Collaborating for Quality*

I recognize that higher education in Belize has developed in somewhat of an eclectic way, I don't want to say haphazard for wanting to be positive, but we have somehow or the other borrowed from systems, and I myself, when I became appointed as an administrator, I was not a trained administrator and so many of the things I did initially was what I saw other people do. (T#7:LINE 109)

Although there were no written or approved quality assurance guidelines in most institutions, a number of common strategies for achieving quality were found. One of the most common strategies was to "borrow quality" from systems or structures regarded as having high standards and, therefore, being of good quality. For example, some participants mentioned the use of CAPE syllabi in developing institutional course outlines. One participant stated, "For those courses that are connected to CAPE, the course outlines are just directly derived from CXC CAPE syllabi" (T#15:LINE377).

Another participant noted:

We want to know that the course that we offer have some standards and so we do use the syllabi from the Caribbean Advanced Proficiency Examinations as a guide to developing the course outlines. In some cases we deliver virtually wholesale just that it is broken up to fit our evening schedule, and in others it is just used as a backdrop. (T#1:LINE88)

Often, curriculum was borrowed directly from other institutions. One participant explained the rationale for this widespread practice as follows:

If there's a need for a particular program, it's very likely that other institutions might be offering that program, so there's no need to reinvent the wheel....If you are going to articulate courses or programs, then you need to make sure that there is some level of similarity, so we look at other models and then we adapt those models to our needs. (T#15:LINE316)

Another participant offered the following explanation of his institution's curriculum development process in the case of one program:

What we did to develop the Tourism program was to work along with the owners and the managers of the different resorts; we worked with the university as well to get the academic side and we created a program, not from scratch, it was simply looking at what existed at the university... we worked with someone from the university to help us put our program together. (T#10:LINE140)

It was evident that borrowing from foreign institutions, particularly North American ones, was also common practice. The following comments came from participants at different institutions:

Although we do surveys and other things in consulting with stakeholders, the course sequence we develop, we make sure that it meets the total number of credits set in reputable institutions...we will try to balance it more or less to set levels from most institutions we work with through COBEC or other programs at other North American universities. (T#2:LINE74)

While we put together our program development committees and although we share it locally, I would always feel more satisfied if at least two or three persons from other... institutions would also look at it...We have an open invitation from an academic chairperson from a department in [name of American university] to come to Belize and assist us in that process, so we will take up that offer to use that expertise. (T#4:LINE700)

We try to go to local programs first, but we also look at programs outside because there's so much information now on the Internet and it's readily available... we have been having some discussions with a college in the U.S. which offers a program; so there is a model that is out there and here is an institution that is willing to work with us. It makes it a lot easier for us to set up the program. (T#15:LINE326)

Even though a lot of the curriculum that Belizean institutions used was borrowed, it appeared that faculty members still greatly influenced decisions such as which courses and programs were offered. For example, one participant stated, "In some cases it's a passion coming from the teacher, 'I believe that students should have an opportunity to do a course in Christology', and so there's a course for that" (T#4:LINE481). Another

participant explained, “We have about six English courses because the English teachers felt that we shouldn’t do a semester without English.” She also added, “We’ve introduced QuickBooks because some of our faculty are working in the private sector out there and they are saying students coming out need to know QuickBooks because that’s what many companies are using for their accounting purposes” (T#12:LINE126). Another participant explained the process at his institution as follows:

Whenever there’s the need for a program, it will probably come from the department. The whole idea stems from the department. The department sees that there’s a need for this program and so it comes first as an initiative from the department. Then it comes to administration. Administration then has to look at how feasible it would be and you would need to do a market analysis to see if, first of all, you’re going to have students who would want to attend a program like that....I would then need to get approval from the Board to get it done.  
(T#15:LINE339)

At another institution, a participant explained,

We begin with the people on the ground, my resident experts, my staff. Where we use the syllabuses from CXC CAPE for academic transfer into a university, the syllabuses already exist, so it is more how do you pattern it, how do you change it within that framework. Where there’s a course, let’s say like Tourism or even our Environmental Science program, or where we are trying to shift base, such as the Nursing program, we begin in both cases, with our resident expert.  
(T#10:LINE418)

This practice of relying on internal expertise is important to note since Lim’s (1999) findings on the state of higher education institutions in developing countries are applicable to the Belizean context. For example, institutional documents showed that the majority of junior college faculty members held undergraduate degrees and those with graduate degrees were mostly in the field of secondary education. Likewise, within the university subsector, the majority of faculty members did not possess a terminal degree and there was a heavy reliance on even less qualified adjunct faculty (usually drawn from the junior college subsector) to deliver Associate’s degree-level courses. Research was

not an emphasis or requirement for faculty at any of the institutions studied. Furthermore, observations of facilities at the participating institutions revealed that library collections were severely limited, outdated, or non-existent, and most of the junior colleges still shared facilities such as classrooms, computer labs, libraries, and science laboratories with their affiliate high schools.

Given the relatively low level of subject-area expertise, resources, and curriculum development support available within individual institutions, some type of collaboration may be an institution's best bet for developing quality curriculum. ATLIB, in a recent initiative, the National Articulation Framework (NAF) created a formal medium for collaboration among local institutions. NAF's aim was to facilitate transfer of courses among local institutions by standardizing requirements for Associate's degree programs. Several participants noted the role that NAF had played in changing what they did within their own institutions. For example, one participant explained, "Through the assistance of the National Articulation Framework Committee... we have become more integrated in the way that we handle curriculum issues" (T#7:LINE132). Another participant offered the following comment:

I think what we are doing right now for education at this level with the articulation is a good start to build up a standard for education in Belize. I like it very much because I know where I am going and where I can take these students to. We don't have to depend on the CAPE alone. We could do our thing and we still do our CAPE exam. (T#11:LINE551)

A third participant from a different junior college stated:

All Department Chairs and the Assistant Dean are right now collaborating in the ongoing effort working with the university through ATLIB in the National Articulation Framework and as they do that they're evaluating the courses and the syllabi and evaluating their programs to ensure that there is a fit and it's not only that they want to make sure that our programs fit within the university programs but that we have what we want...so that it works for both of us. (T#5:LINE121)

The fear that the process was or had the potential to become prescriptive and university-centered was evident in a couple of the participants' comments. One participant from the junior college sector claimed,

We've gotten caught up in the whole articulation process...So that is what is driving exactly what our curriculum should look like. I don't know if it's such a good thing, but again we have to balance—we have to work out a balance between such that we want our students...to be able to have most of their courses transferred; so right now our courses and so on are being reviewed and compared...and being modified. (T#12:LINE161)

Another participant from the university subsector said, "I think somewhere there was a misconception that one institution wanted to take over certain things. I don't think there was ever any intention [to do that]; I think we were trying to standardize..."

(T#2:LINE438). As indicated in this last comment, there appears to be an underlying mistrust, or at least the perception of there being one, between the university and junior college subsectors. This was evident in the comments from several other participants. For example, one participant stated, "We try to work with our ATLIB partners, which at times I believe is viewed with a lot of suspicion" (T#16:LINE119). He later added, "We're not trying to control things; we're just trying to make sure we have a unified voice as tertiary level institutions" (T#16:LINE623).

Despite the sentiments of mistrust, the importance of the process seemed to be an accepted premise. One participant explained:

What is missing is how we get the bigger schools, the more popular junior colleges, the ones who seem to be well established to sit down with our new people and say, "Here are the guidelines." I must say indirectly it is being done, where these new schools would call in to say, "You know, I need help with this. How do you do it?" But when they contact three of us, they might get three different answers which means they might prepare a fourth one by looking at the three. That is why this national articulation framework that we are doing is very, very important. I see it as one of the first steps in creating a clear guideline of some of what will be expected at the tertiary level. (T#10:LINE268)

There is one set of programs, teacher education, that already has established guidelines and over which individual faculty members and institutions have considerably less control. As one participant explained,

The Ministry has the Belize Board of Teacher Education, so they approve all our programs and their approval is important for us for the remuneration of our students, of the graduates. We can offer programs that they don't approve, but we never do that because we do not want to shortchange our students. We're looking at the currency of the degree, that once the student is finished we want that degree to have some currency. So they are very much involved in any program that we review; we have to put them as part of our review team in terms of getting their feedback, in terms of once we have revised the program... (T#14:LINE357)

Although only in its embryonic stage, several institutions were beginning to actively seek out input from relevant external stakeholders and to build the culture of evidence Dill (1999) refers to in his academic learning organization model. For example, one participant explained, "We're currently reviewing program specification documents. There is a deliberate effort to send these, after they've been reviewed, to external stakeholders" (T#13:LINE21). There is an effort to institutionalize the process as well, as the participant explained,

We are instituting, at least one for every Faculty, an advisory council made up of mostly stakeholders who can accompany the delivery of the program, who can accompany program review, and who can give us good feedback on how we are performing. (T#13:LINE797)

The process is less formal at other institutions; nonetheless, there is evidence that input from various stakeholders is sought and that it is being used in curriculum design. One participant explained,

With the new programs that we've formed, we have always invited outsiders, particularly people associated with whatever sector the program might be leaning towards, because we want buy-in, we want the program to be relevant, and we want our graduates to be hired.... We want our students to matriculate easily and so we have to involve outsiders and there is no room for pride. There's no room to



feel like you're lesser of a professional by putting your work out there to say, 'Listen, can you take a look at this? Can you tear this apart?' because the objective is to come up with a product, a proposal, a program that is of sound quality and that will be accepted. (T#4:LINE163)

Another participant stated,

We are presently looking an Associate's degree in Paralegal Studies because a number of students have asked for it. So I ...sent out a basic profile of what the courses would look like and I've given it to a number of lawyers to ask, 'Is this what you would like from a paralegal assistant in your firm? If not, what would you like to add? What do you think can be taken away?' and we'll use that to inform the final product. (T#12:LINE175)

Another participant described how his institution determined the demand for programs by surveying potential students. He explained, "We send the questionnaires to hotels and we find out how many of them have a sixth form [education].... We will look at our high school and ask them how many students are in the business program right now" (T#9:LINE255). Institutions gathered informal input from graduates as well. For example, one participant explained,

We get feedback from our students when they're employed and when they move on to [name of university]. For example, I remember one of our students saying 'I didn't do enough Math. I have all this other additional Math courses to do.' So you have to take feedback like that and use it. (T#4:LINE341)

Feedback from employers was cited by several participants. Some of the feedback came from internships "We get valuable feedback from their on-site supervisors as well, as a part of the evaluation" (T#4:LINE361). Similarly, another participant from a different institution stated,

We collect feedback from at least seven of the resorts in the area, but it is more a grading of what they see our students doing.... when the teacher visits they would also point out some weaknesses. The form is not structured in such a way that they could give you a lot of the strengths and weaknesses of the system. What it has is comments and from the comments they make then we evaluate the program. (T#10:LINE470)

At other times, the feedback was obtained through casual contact with employers. As one participant explained, “We have a lot of informal feedback. We have a lot of face-to-face because in the small community, you would interact with employers on a daily basis” (T#10:LINE495). Another participant described the result of a chance encounter with an employer:

One of our employers said, ‘Well, you know, your program is solid. We send some of our people there, but your program only uses Windows as its base operating system. A lot of businesses prefer Linux or UNIX. Your program provides no exposure for students to those other operating systems. You might want to take a look at that.’ So we get the feedback. What I think we need to work on is to formalize the process because those are instances where the people are comfortable enough to bring that up in a dialogue or some discussion. (T#4:LINE345)

Generally, the gathering of data in a scientific way to support curriculum review and development was found to be lacking. As one participant explained, “There’s nothing formal; to a large extent, it is based on the leader’s perception on the need for the involvement of outsiders” (T#4:LINE161). She further noted the following: “We don’t really have a culture of planning and so, while there is general agreement about the need for it, it’s still quite a task to get everybody on task.... I think it’s a cultural thing” (T#4:LINE354). On the positive side, though, an openness to learn from others and the willingness to use that knowledge to effect changes, two other elements of Dill’s (1999) learning organization model, were evident.

#### *Uncertain Outcomes*

If quality is to be judged by any of the definitions that emerged in the study such as excellence, meeting high standards, the institution’s fitness for preparing students for employment, or the transformation of students, then appropriate evaluation measures would have to be in place. On the contrary, only a small percentage of tertiary level

students take external exams (traditional measure of excellence), no institution has yet submitted itself for accreditation (evidence of meeting high standards), and feedback from employers and alumni is largely informal and anecdotal. The culture of evidence Kells (1995) refers to is not present and as a result, the quality and outcomes of Belizean higher education remain undetermined.

It is not surprising then, that the question “How do you ensure students are learning?” noticeably caused the most pause of any question in the interview. One participant responded,

That is a tough area and to a certain extent we can only use grades, which may not be the best indicator, but for what it’s worth, standards are set according to student achievement on individual tests, assignment and so on....Basically we rely on the grades that come from the individual courses to indicate student learning. (T#1:LINE156)

Another participant explained,

I think that assessment of student learning is one of the areas that we’re not too strong in and the reason I say that is that we are currently embarking on a number of things that will help us to improve that assessment. What we’re finding out is that we have quite a number of individuals who are versed in content, meaning the degree, but not necessarily competent in teaching, and one of the common concerns that we have received has to do with measurement and evaluation and strategies. We have recognized that weakness so what we have embarked on, starting last semester, is a series of faculty professional development workshops to equip our faculty to be much better versed in those areas and not only with measurement and evaluation but in teaching strategies, looking at new technologies to teach, going to online support systems, et cetera. So at this point in time, assessment is one of those areas that can do with some strengthening. (T#3:LINE260)

The absence of clearly articulated program goals and student learning outcomes may be one of the reasons for this difficulty. Only recently have institutions begun to deliberate on what programs are supposed to be achieving in terms of what students should know and be able to do at the completion of a program. No institution has yet put

in place a comprehensive system to assess achievement of general core or program level outcomes. The system generally relies on individual courses and instructors to determine student achievement and to award degrees.

Nonetheless, there are some promising practices emerging. For example, several institutions have implemented policies for common final exams. One participant explained, “When we have that—multiple sections of a course—they give one exam” (T#12:LINE247). A participant from another institution also explained,

Most courses that are run in multiple sections have a common final exam and we try to develop the final exam two or three weeks before the final exam date so that relevant faculty members through the Program Leader meet, discuss, and formulate the exam... (T#2:LINE364)

Internships are another common practice among institutions. Internships normally come at the end of a program and serve as a capstone activity in which students are expected to put into practical use what they have learned in course-work. Internships are done in Business, Tourism, and Teacher Education programs. The length and requirements vary by institution and by program. Here are a few examples of the internship programs at the various institutions as described by participants:

We have local internships and we have international internships. The local internship is extremely structured, whereby students apply to three institutions to seek to do their internship and go in for actual interviews.... We go out and do actual inspection with two site visits and then there’s an exit interview that takes place with our internship coordinator and their supervisor where the supervisor would have to fill out a form and jointly they would assign a grade to the intern, so it’s fairly comprehensive. The international one, we have students who go to Orlando, Florida to do internship with the Disney program, and that one we would have one visit to see them half way through. (T#16:LINE312)

The Tourism program is geared specifically towards the world of work and the last part of that program is an internship where we ask the resort to accept our intern and give them a grade which is about 40 percent of their grade for that semester. They have to do practical experience for ninety hours. The good side of that is that we have quite a few resorts who have said to students ‘I have a job for

you.’ They had asked a student to start work immediately and I had to say, “Ah, you will not be earning enough and you will have nothing. Get your Associate’s degree first.’ And so we have students who are working out there at some of the resorts where they did their internship or they’re working somewhere else but got a recommendation from where they did their internship. (T#10:LINE144)

The Teacher Education Program of course has the internship. They have two internship periods built into it and those are assessed both by internal assessors as well as external assessors. In that program our teacher educators do a lot of cross supervision and cross assessment...the Business programs and certainly the Tourism program also has as a capstone activity, an internship, whether it’s at a bank or at a resort, and assessors from here will also go out to those places and whomever they’re partnering with at whatever institution, they also get assessed there as a part of the final assessment. (T#5:LINE356)

A few less common but emerging initiatives are noteworthy. These include the use of portfolios, capstone courses, and seminar papers as described by the participants below:

For the new programs that have been developed, there’s always a portfolio and interview requirement, so that we can look at it and have it, as best as possible, provide whatever evidence we think should be there of the growth of the person while he or she is with us.... So we can look at it not just to see how students have grown but as a part of the program review process and we’re hoping that we can revisit the old programs, those that were in existence before...to see how we can involve the portfolio requirement. (T#4:LINE62)

The Small Business Management course is really a capstone course and so we’re looking at that to see how we can use that course and the assessment attached to that to look at to what extent have students learned or developed the competencies we say they would have done the Business Management program. So it’s a work in progress for us. (T#4:LINE332)

The substitute for that internship is a seminar paper whereby students have to develop a proposal and actually execute a research project and at the end of the semester they defend their findings to a panel of faculty members....for the conference, they selected the best of the seminar paper defense. (T#16:LINE334)

One of the ways to determine achievement of program outcomes is to have standardized comprehensive exams which are externally controlled and subscribed to by several institutions. This allows for comparability and benchmarking among institutions. The

CAPE is one example of such a system and several institutions use CAPE in this way.

For example, one participant stated,

CAPE does have its role especially in the light that we don't have an external quality assurance agency here...right now that is what tells us that our students are achieving on par with, or at least the teachers are teaching well enough to allow them to pass these exams on par with, students in the other Caribbean territories and the other institutions in Belize. (T#12:LINE99)

Another participant commented,

External exams serve a very good purpose in the whole issue of quality assurance because they provide that opportunity for the institution to be measured in an objective manner against other institutions and that somehow measures a certain aspect of success....So external examinations, the concept is a good one, if done properly... (T#7:LINE429)

As mentioned earlier, one of the current problems with CAPE is that few students take the exam and this limits the utility of CAPE as a measure of institutional achievement of program objectives. Another limitation of CAPE is that it focuses primarily on pure disciplines such as mathematics, natural sciences, humanities, and social sciences. The exams do not address achievement in professional programs. A few avenues for external assessment in professional programs do exist. For example in the case of Teacher Education, the Board of Teacher Education is involved in the external evaluation of students at the end of the Associate's degree program. Similarly, one institution reported the involvement of the Belize Tourism Board in the external assessment of students from its Tourism program. The participant explained,

The Belize Tourism Board provides the exams and the correction of the exams. We're working quite well in terms of that and our students got 100 percent passes in the first try.... They [the Belize Tourism Board] do the independent grading and stuff like that so they[students] get two grades; they get a grade from BTB and a grade from us, but the one from BTB counts towards the tour guide license. (T#9:LINE238)

There is another area where there is clear need for integrating existing opportunities for external assessment. This disconnect was evident in the response from the following participant:

Our nurses sit a regional exam, so that is how they get licensed. Their license is issued based on their pass rate. So that is a clear indicator of outcome, if they're receiving the kinds of skills and the knowledge, et cetera, that they're supposed to get as we have stated in the program specifications.... We hear all the time that nursing students don't pass the regional nursing exam; they don't do well; and it's different from when there was a Nursing School. There's a lot of talk but we don't know what the evidence says and from what I'm hearing it's not all that bad. But that's what I want to see.... It may be interesting to look at.... The exam is handled through the Nursing Council but the result is not fed back into us.... they have it but we have not received it. (T#17:LINE267)

A number of participants reported on efforts to strengthen the "paper and pencil" approach to assessing student learning by developing and instituting policies and guidelines on student assessment. Here are a few examples from three different institutions:

We did a survey of what is currently happening on the ground with the assessment of student learning. So we picked up that data from that survey and I then said to the consultant, "Use this; this is what the institution is doing right now. Use your expertise, look at good practices, good models, and formulate something for us." So we have on paper, a manual that has policies, regulations, protocols on the assessment of student learning. Now that document is being reviewed.... once that is done, then that feedback will go into the drafting of another version of the document and that will then come back for a second filter. (T#13:LINE281)

One of the things we've introduced this school year is the use of Engrade by everybody.... what it does is enable students to monitor their progress as they go along, but very importantly, since it is centralized now, then as the administrator... we can log in and see if this instructor is leaving all the assessment towards the end of the term, if the grades are being recorded.... so we're able to do that kind of monitoring. (T#4:LINE251)

We have standardized course outlines and pretty much for a course we have collectively agreed that in a regular course, 1000 points is adequate... and in that 1000 points could be a final examination of 200 points.... a minimum of four regular tests, maybe 200 points in presentations, and each presentation or any activity that requires subjective grading must be accompanied by a rubric. It must

be. If there's no rubric, the student can actually file a complaint and it is discarded... if a teacher administers a test and more than half of the students fail that test that has to be discussed with the assistant dean and then teacher and assistant dean determine who was to blame—the teacher didn't teach effectively, the student didn't study enough, not enough time—and whatever is determined then it is decided whether that test needs to be re-given or re-taught... I use the word blame but it's not for that purpose; it's like, "Let us determine what caused this result." (T#7:LINE396)

The same participant also explained his institution's procedures for validating tests and exams:

We must have access to all tests that are administered to students. On a random basis, we check for a number of things: Is the test, testing what you taught? Is the test testing at the appropriate level of difficulty?...The test must start with the basic questions, the lower Bloom's taxonomy scale, recall. We're looking at the amount at each level and eventually there must be something testing the higher level skills of the student.... now we cannot check all test all the time, so we do it randomly, but final exams, all of them are tested.... During the end of the semester, the Assistant Dean, that's all he's doing—level of difficulty, length of the exam and the validity and reliability of exam, that's with the traditional form of testing, and the modes. They know that they cannot just give true-and-false and multiple choice and things like that. It has to be a little bit of everything. In terms of the alternative modes of assessment, they need to be backed up by the proper procedures. You just don't give me a discussion and call it a discussion. We use the rubric. (T#7:LINE453)

Although the outcomes of Belizean higher education are at this time uncertain and efforts to determine the attainment of such outcomes are just beginning, institutions do pay considerable attention to the inputs into the system, particularly the academic preparation of incoming students. As one participant explained, "If an applicant is not fully equipped to go into the Associate's degree, we provide the one year that is aimed at helping that person get to that level" (T#1:LINE39). So, the assessment focus of the Belizean higher education system seems to be more on ensuring the quality of inputs (in terms of student readiness to undertake college-level work) and less on the quality of



outcomes (the knowledge and skills of graduates). For example, one participant explained,

We have an admissions policy. Each department sets certain criteria....If you don't meet [the criteria], we look for avenues. The student can go through certain process[es], maybe spend another year or so before we turn them out. That's one rule.... The Chair along with [a] few selected individuals, we call them Program Coordinators, screen the application. When they screen the application they make sure that if a student applies for a particular major, he has the necessary requisites. (T#2:LINE60)

All institutions had some type of remedial program in place to address the shortcomings of incoming students. For example, at one institution, a participant explained,

The English courses are the first ones that showed the need and so we have at least one Fundamental grammar course. That is one of the ones that you have to pass, otherwise you repeat and if you don't get that done within your first year, you can't advance to the second year....We noted some shortcomings in the Business students and so we have introduced an Introductory Accounting course, which anybody whose accounting grade from the high school transcript or, in the case of some people, who want to do Business and never did do Accounting, they have to take that course. (T#1:LINE181)

In addition to remedial courses, some institutions were implementing academic assistance programs. For example, at one institution,

There's a proposal now to establish a tutoring center. That is not in place yet but should be in effect, come August. We have been able to arrange...tutorials particularly in Mathematics, because that is an area of weakness. That's a challenge for quite a few of our students....We also have a writing workshop that we've implemented over the last two years...some students still need assistance in writing, articulating their thoughts, putting letters together, essays, expressing themselves, so there's a writing workshop that's six hours in length and it's offered by the teachers and we refer students to that. Other than that it would be just the online tutorials, available on CDs and DVDS in the library and the kind hearts of instructors who make themselves available during office hours and otherwise to help. (T#4:LINE422)

In summary, as one participant noted, for most programs "There's no real stringent way or no external body to independently and objectively assess the students

who come out of here” (T#17:LINE267). The primary strategy for determining course achievement and program achievement relies on “just paper and pencil test and mid-term and final exams” (T#5:LINE356).

### ***Research Question #3—Vision for External Quality Assurance***

How do academic leaders regard the proposed implementation of an external quality assurance system?

#### *Filling the Quality Assurance Vacuum*

What else exists right now in Belize to tell us that what you are doing is okay? Is there any written agreement anywhere among the tertiary institutions? Is there anything written that from among ourselves we could say, “Here is the criteria that we want.” When nothing exists, it creates a vacuum where each one of us thinks we’re doing great and each one of us might know which one is not doing so great. (T#10:LINE264)

All participants agreed with the need for an external quality assurance system in Belize.

The most common reason given for the need was simply, as one participant declared, “There is no mechanism in place now” (T#2:LINE458). Another participant explained, “There is no document anywhere for you to say, ‘A new school is coming or being developed, here is what they need to do’...” (T#10:LINE907).

There were various opinions on the particular purpose such a system should serve. One common suggestion was to use the system to establish national quality standards, particularly baseline or minimal standards for entry of new institutions and continued operation of existing ones, in other words, quality control (IIEP, 2007a). The absence of guidelines and the perceived discrepancies in standards were mentioned by many participants. For example, one participant stated that, “We certainly do need an external quality assurance system. We are finding for example, through our National Articulation Framework Committee, through ATLIB, we’re finding some diverse standards that are

being applied particularly as it relates to courses” (T#3:LINE315). The call for setting minimum standards was repeated by many of the participants. For example, one participant said,

We do need some body, some agency, that establishes standards that schools, tertiary institutions must meet, that examines institutions that spring up that want to open up that call themselves universities or junior colleges, that sets standards for somebody who is teaching an Associate’s degree program—they must at least have this kind of qualification. If they’re teaching a Bachelor’s degree, they must at least have this and so on.... That requires schools to have quality assurance programs in place; that requires my school to do ongoing professional development activities and evaluate my faculty. (T#5:LINE588)

Another participant agreed, saying,

Whilst we cannot force people to pursue excellence, I believe we can to a large extent force people to meet minimum requirements, and so I believe there must be an agency that will insist on meeting minimum requirements. This thing about schools just opening up—and it is the scenario in Belize—is unacceptable. As it is right now, I can argue that there are more tertiary institutions than we need in this country....we must have something that establishes minimum standards. (T#7:LINE565)

Some participants made particular mention of the need for monitoring the quality of distance and online programs. For example, one participant stated,

I think there definitely is [need for external quality assurance] because we need to look at not just our institutions but all the providers from outside Belize who are providing higher education in Belize. Whether online or face-to-face, they shouldn’t just be allowed to come in and do that without somebody, some institution or agency, monitoring them. So the need is definitely there. (T#12:LINE312)

Likewise, another participant commented,

There is a need to have, perhaps an external body, maybe even the National Accreditation Council, set the minimum criteria for the operation of your tertiary level organization and certainly to begin to take a look at those institutions that are without borders, because it’s fairly easy to visit local institutions but there are number of online institutions and other institutions that offer programs by distance, whether online or otherwise, that they need to look at too. (T#4:LINE565)

The general call was to implement a system that would begin to look comprehensively at the quality of the entire higher education system. A system that would determine, as one participant envisioned, “whether the institution has met the requirements to deliver in terms of the qualifications of its people, in terms of the experience of its people, in terms of the output of the institution” (T#14:LINE445).

A sense of urgency for the establishment of such a system was expressed by several participants. For example, one participant offered the following comment:

I believe we have to do it [implement an external quality assurance system]. It’s a must. And the longer we take to do it the more backwards we will be. I think that should be implemented as soon as possible to start to standardize the way we develop programs [and] the way we offer programs. (T#6:LINE393)

The comments from participants also reflected openness to inviting others in to evaluate their institutions. As one participant explained,

Sometimes when you’re in the midst of things, you develop some blinders and so there is value in having an external team or body take a look at what you’re doing. Sometimes it takes somebody else looking in to say, ‘But, have you taken a look at this yet?’ So there is value in that. (T#4:LINE508)

She later added, “We ought not to be saying, ‘We think we’re fantastic. We do a good job.’ It’s important for other people to say, ‘Hey, listen, we have looked at it and, you know, it’s pretty good’” (T#4:LINE741). Other participants agreed. One stated,

Many times, if we’re not told what’s wrong, we tend to be very complacent and we think that everything we’re doing is done the way it should, but when somebody is monitoring, then there’s the tendency to want to make sure that you will satisfy all the requirements that are necessary and so on the basis of that, I believe that we ought to have an external moderation. Even though we might be doing internally what we think would measure minimum standards or would measure the quality that we hope [for], there’s the need for somebody outside of your own environment to look at things from a different perspective and to tell you, not only the good things you’re doing but also to let you know that there is the need for other areas to be improved on. (T#15:LINE575)

In addition to setting standards, some participants also shared the view that the external quality assurance system should serve the purpose of making institutions more accountable to stakeholders such as students and the government. For example, one participant shared the view, “I think external quality assurance is more for a check and balance. We need to be accountable, transparent in terms of what we do...”

(T#8:LINE337). Another participant explained, “We’re talking here about accountability. Students are paying for a service and that service has to be of the best quality because these students have been entrusted to us” (T#15:LINE735). Another participant suggested that external quality assurance “should probably also look at how we use the resources that we have, seeing that most of the tertiary institutions are government funded”

(T#12:LINE329). One participant broadened the scope of accountability to include the general public. She stated,

External quality assurance helps to provide very valuable information, not just to the institution but to the general public...it protects the public interest and if we have clearly defined what our programs are about then I think we should be able to hold it up and say, ‘Hey, you can measure us against what we say we’re about. These are the goals and objectives of the program. This is how we believe students will be when they have completed the programs. So you can take a look at it.’ It is not enough to say that, ‘Well we think we are the best thing since sliced bread.’ Let somebody else look at us, assess and evaluate what they see, and let them say we are the best thing since sliced bread. (T#4:LINE496)

Some participants also saw external quality assurance as a pathway to quality improvement. One participant said, “There must be minimal standards everywhere you go but sometimes you can run into trouble because minimal standards mean some people only strive for the minimal” (T#14:LINE679). Another participant explained, “Sometimes not until you get the external assessor...not until you get those standards, would you even become conscious of some of the ways that you could improve your

institution” (T#1:LINE271). A third participant offered the opinion that external quality assurance would “raise the standard and improve the quality of all our institutions” (T#12:LINE315) and that the system “needs to look at how we improve and how we continually improve” (T#12:LINE 329).

There were several other comments indicating recognition of the need for continuous quality improvement. For example, one participant said, “Guidelines are important to be able to achieve our goals in terms of keeping the quality and building on it because as time goes by, things change, so we need to keep abreast in terms of those changes...” (T#8:LINE339). Another participant explained,

We can’t be complacent. If we’re going to look at quality, then it must mean quality, not something mediocre and say it’s excellent. For us, generally you might feel satisfied that you’re doing the best but there might be some aspects in which you’re not doing the best. (T#15:LINE607)

The complacency mentioned by the previous participant was reiterated by another one who stated,

We have been complacent and relaxed in our job and happy with the status quo because...even if you’re there, there’s always room for improvement. Some schools might be there, you have basic stuff and you are happy...to remain right there. I think it’s going to push you to improve, to keep on improving services for students, looking at their needs, [and] meeting it....I would love to still be in education and see it [external quality assurance] implemented. I would love to know that my school is visited, because while you’re here doing this you will fail to see some of the shortcomings and areas that can be improved. Somebody coming from the outside will see it and I don’t mind being told what it is. I don’t mind the challenge of meeting it and improving things for our students. So I would really love to see it implemented. (T#12:LINE484)

In general, the vision was for an external quality assurance system that would fulfill multiple purposes. As one participant stated, “I would want to see a combination of purposes rather than just focusing on one area” (T#12:LINE332). Combining the purposes of standard setting and improvement, one participant commented “I think there

is a need individually for institutions to grow and then nationally for us to know where we stand” (T#1:LINE289). In summing up her views on the purpose of external quality assurance, one participant offered the following:

We need a blended system. We do need something to address the element of efficiency. You want to know that you are getting the bang for the bucks. Bottom-line that’s the world today. So if we’re going after research dollars and any other grant moneys or endowments, et cetera, it says that we have to be able to account for the financial resources and so there’s an element of that. I think the element of a minimum standard, that’s the approach I shared with you earlier that we want to sit at the table with you as adults which means I have to come with certain things, but the idea of improving quality is also a critical piece. (T#17:LINE421)

Clearly, participants agreed that there is a need for an external quality assurance system; however, some also expressed wariness of the challenges of introducing and sustaining such a system in Belize. Financial and human resource limitations were mentioned by many participants as being important factors to overcome. One participant stated, “We’ve said that it needs to be in place but most of the times, other more pressing needs get the moneys that government has and so that’s an issue” (T#1:LINE394).

Another participant suggested that finance “is going to be an area of hardship for some institutions, especially if you’re trying to accredit a program. To meet the cost of that will be a challenge” (T#4:LINE666). On the other hand, one participant provided the following comment:

Well to answer the question about if can we afford it, my response would be, “Can we afford not to have it?” I don’t think that we can afford not to have it. Right now the public purse pays 70 percent of our salaries.... I think that parents and students might not complain so much about the increase in tuition.... We don’t resist paying for quality. People send their children to the U.S.; people borrow money to send their kids to school.... We have DFC that now has money available for tertiary education....So people will pay if we can assure them that [we are] providing them with quality and that is one of the primary purposes of accreditation. It assures the users of the system of higher education—the students,

the clients—that they’re getting value for money and so we need it and it has to be paid for by the institutions... (T#5:LINE630)

Other participants expressed similar sentiments. These included comments such as “If it is mandatory, then I believe that schools would have to apply for it to get done and there should be a fee that the institution pays” (T#1:LINE441), “If the institutions are suppose to benefit from the external review, they should share in the cost ...” (T#1:LINE 432), and “I think each institution should pay a license and pay an administrative fee for when they’re doing accreditation, evaluation, whatever. At least that” (T#6:LINE438). Likewise, another participant added, “There are several steps in the whole process of monitoring, self-study and all that; those are costs that schools must pay. They’re supposed to be factored into fees for students” (T#7:LINE611).

Most participants expected that institutions and, by extension, students would need to contribute to the cost of external quality assurance; however, there was one participant who did not support the idea of a direct fee to students. He stated,

I’m not sure if you want to identify a fee for that particular purpose but I think out of your budget, money ought to be allocated for this particular exercise. I don’t believe in saying, “Well I want to put this in place, so students should pay for it.” It has to do with the level of commitment that you have for something like that. You have to be fully committed to making sure that you want to get this done and that is what will drive whatever decision you make, looking at what would be the outcomes and who will benefit. The students will benefit but the institution will benefit most, because you have to look at the fact that if somebody is saying to you [that] you meet standards, then that is helping your marketing strategy. They are in fact saying that this is a good school. (T#15:LINE704)

Whatever institutions pay is likely to come from one of two sources—subventions from government or student fees—unless the system changes. Several participants did see a role for sectors other than government, students, and institutions in funding external



quality assurance. For example, one participant suggested seeking external funding for the initial setting up of a secretariat. She explained,

You could perhaps get some grant monies through the CDB and the EU for that because a national accreditation council was mandated by the CARICOM Heads of Government, so there might be some grant monies that one could get if the powers that be knew where to look. (T#5:LINE741)

Another participant suggested, “Maybe industry or private sector could chip in as well because the graduates feed straight into their places and they have been hollering about the quality of graduates... I think [the] business sector too, could help” (T#1:LINE451).

Another participant agreed, saying,

The private sector will benefit from it [external quality assurance] because if I have a business and I want to hire people from that particular institution and I know that that institution is meeting minimum standards as established by an accreditation agency, then I’m going to be getting a [good] product from that institution, so I think they should [contribute]. I’m not saying they have to, but they should. (T#15:LINE687)

Since no study exists on the actual cost of implementing an external quality assurance system in Belize, the question of funding is still an abstract one and depends on what participants envision such a system would entail. Expecting that external quality assurance would be an expensive venture, several participants advocated for a small scale system. For example, one person explained,

I get scared when everybody talks about the cost. We don’t have the cash but there’s a possibility that we could get a lot of work done if we stop focusing on the cash because we are interpreting the cash sometimes according to what the international agency said it would cost.... The bottom line is, no matter what it [the problem] is, whether it is finance or whatever, I still believe we can do quite a bit among ourselves. So let us see what we can do, what we can agree on and then we go further. (T#10:LINE959)

Similarly, another participant said,

I don’t think that we should start in any big elaborate way, but I think that a conversation needs to be had with a broad cross-section of people that includes

both the current providers of higher education or post-secondary education, people in the marketplace, that includes people who have gone through this process... Ideally we would want a UCJ. Can Belize afford a UCJ with eleven institutions? No, we can't. But what can we afford? (T#5:LINE538)

One participant suggested the following approach:

I think that it should not be a very huge office. I think you start with one administrator with some qualifications, with some knowledge, and then probably an administrative assistant who can do the paperwork, and then you can probably bring in people from time to time to set up the policies. (T#2:LINE550)

In summary, participants agreed on the need for an external quality assurance system in Belize that would serve multiple purposes. They regard funding as a potential challenge but believe it not to be an insurmountable one.

#### *Preference for Local Jurisdiction*

Another area of agreement among participants was support for the idea of a local system of external quality assurance rather than subscribing to a regional or international system, especially in the initial stages. One participant, in particular, expressed very strong views against a foreign option, stating, "I would have horrors if the agency was from another country [be]cause we're going to be in trouble. Maybe down the road we could see ourselves being able to, but I think we need to creep before we walk" (T#1:LINE410). Several rationales were offered to support setting up a local rather than regional system. For example, one participant said,

Right now, I think we need to set up our own standards here because we know Belizeans best. What I would do is, just like we're doing as a new school, is to look at the different programs and find people within the system who can put this thing together. I know we have people here who can do that. We don't need a hundred people in this. You don't need more than ten or five people. You can find that around here in Belize, people who are government-paid, know that this is their job... because who's going to know about your system more than you? Why would you want Jamaican people to come here? They have their own business to look after. (T#11:LINE476)

Another participant shared the following:

I think I would prefer a national model mainly because the bigger countries, bigger in the sense of economy and resources, Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad, Guyana, they're each going the national route. Who are we left to work with? Geographically, even culturally, a little different from us, the Eastern Caribbean, the smaller islands. I doubt that these four territories will want to undo what they've already done and say, "Okay, we're not going to continue with this." (T#13:LINE1071)

Concerns over the practicality of a regional (Caribbean) collaboration on external quality assurance were discussed by other participants as well. For example one participant said,

I always get very apprehensive when we join regionally I've travelled to many of these regional conferences. I have been in many regional discussion[s] and I think Belize, like Guyana, has a very unique situation that sometimes the region doesn't understand and so we can end up sometimes setting a set of standards that we cannot meet and that would be defeatist. (T#14:LINE490)

She continued,

I think we have to be real. Belize cannot compare itself to Trinidad and to Barbados, not even to Jamaica, and when we go regional in a lot of cases these are the countries that take the lead and they set a standard for their country which locks us out, so we are a part but we are spending millions of dollars to try to reach where they are rather than trying to develop our national resources. (T#14:LINE531)

While some opinions had an undertone of nationalistic sentiments, other participants offered more practical reasons for developing a local system. For example, one participant explained,

Something local is welcomed... the ones from outside might be able to come and evaluate maybe every five years or so but the others here in Belize might be able to do it on a yearly basis. So that will ensure that what we have grows... (T#8:LINE512)

Similarly, another participant commented,

If you want an external assessor to come in after you do your work, that could be, but to run the program in such a way that we have our assurances going on every day, we need our local people to do that... (T#11:LINE493)

Although most participants advocated for a locally-controlled rather than foreign-controlled system, many also thought that seeking out external partnerships to assist in the process would be beneficial. For example, one participant explained,

We have to create a system that looks at our context but [also] bear[s] in mind that our context is also globally linked, so having some kind of support from outside of Belize, I think would also give more credibility to the system. (T#15:LINE662)

Another participant stated,

I think maybe we probably need to bring in the regional people from the other Caribbean countries....not necessarily the agency, but a part of the agency. So for example, maybe two persons from Barbados would come and work in Belize for three years on it and you sort of do a rotation like that and maybe three from Belize could go and work in Barbados or Trinidad. I think it would widen their experience as well and build up our pool of people who are qualified in this area. (T#12:LINE376)

It was clear that even though participants overwhelmingly supported local jurisdiction over external quality assurance, most participants were not opposed to the idea of a regional or international collaboration at some stage. For example, one participant offered the following viewpoint:

I think there has to be a national policy and then a regional idea. We live in Belize, so we look at the policies and see what are we doing in Belize and then we say, "We are members of this Caribbean community, we are members of Latin America, so how is it what we are doing will assist our students in moving first within Belize and then whether it is Latin world or Caribbean world?" (T#10:LINE211)

Another participant explained his institution's strategy as follows:

If there is a national system, we have a commitment to the national system. Whether we're going to leave it as our only standard that we're going to meet is a separate question, because our goal right now is to try to raise as much of our standards as possible, meet the national standards and those regionally, and perhaps internationally through agencies such as SACS that are much [more] global. (T#3:LINE449)

Only one participant seemed to express preference for a regional rather than local system.

She explained,

We're a small society and everybody knows everybody....so why not have maybe a cluster of small countries deciding that this is going to be our body? And so when you're doing the visits, you're met by a team that is impartial and who don't know you and know your husband and children and so on and they come and take a look at what you're doing. (T#4:LINE559)

She added,

Maybe one of the reasons we can't get the accreditation council up is because of our small size and there might be some fiscal constraints. There might be strength in numbers. There might be other small countries in our own region struggling with the same issue, so why not consolidate expertise and resources. There is such an entity called CARICOM and coming out of CARICOM you have the CSME that makes provision for the single market and economy. Why can't it be extended to a regional accreditation body so that it would relieve small countries? We are small, but you have even smaller than Belize in the Caribbean region, who might be struggling to get their own accreditation going. (T#4:LINE579)

Other participants, despite their support for a local system, did note the potential challenges. For example, one participant said,

Even though we might have all the heads, to do an evaluation of one institution will take a whole week, maybe two weeks, who knows? To do your own evaluation will take a whole semester; so, say for example I was asked, I don't know if I could say yes; I'm in so many things, you know? (T#6:LINE508)

Another participant explained,

We can't afford to spend lot of money and time. For example, we have four people teaching in a particular subject area and if you ask the subject area team to work on this program, do these processes, it takes about four or five hours a week of their time and you're basically pushing them to the limit and that is not the way to go. (T#2:LINE531)

Despite this concern, most participants expressed the view that the small-size limitation is surmountable. For example, on the issue of limited human resources, one participant stated,

I disagree we don't have the expertise. Again it goes with that perspective constraint. That is what is affecting us implementing quality because we see things too narrowly.... We have lots of people, doctorate level people, teaching in universities around the world.... We are not limited. We have the skills. We have people who are qualified. (T#17:LINE467)

Participants also offered several solutions to the perceived challenge. For example, there were several suggestions to work within structures and systems that are already in place such as ATLIB, COBEC, and NAF. For example, one participant explained,

It need not be a new institution.... you look at how you can network within the system. ...let's say you want to develop an assessment [mechanism]. It would make sense for us to look at our assessment instruments within all of ATLIB. It would make sense because we can learn from one another and we need not hog on to anything. (T#13:LINE910)

Another participant stated,

When I look at the National Articulation Framework, that body can do much in terms of making sure that this [external quality assurance] is in place and representative[s] from the different institutions, organizations involved would be good, but in addition, have others from the private sectors that can give an input in terms of making sure that it is in place... (T#8:LINE356)

One participant suggested that the system draw on U.S. partners from the Consortium for Belize Educational Cooperation (COBEC). He explained, "There are some good guys within COBEC that I think you can depend on and you can coincide with COBEC meetings so they're here, you don't have to pay them. They can stay another two days, you just pay for their accommodations or something" (T#2:LINE629). Another participant also suggested reaching out to professionals and corporations who may "see it as a corporate obligation or a professional obligation" and whose organizations "may fund their travel" (T#17:LINE581).

Many participants also recommended the training of local persons to be able to operate a quality assurance system and serve as evaluators. For example, one participant said,

I think we have people in Belize with some kind of expertise. You might need a little more training, but I'm sure that we have people that have been in higher education for so long that they understand the situation. (T#15:LINE662)

Another participant suggested,

If the persons within the institutions are fully qualified to know what they are to be looking for or could be equipped with those skills...you do some kind of training like we do with the teacher supervision because we have a limited pool to work with. (T#1:LINE400)

Likewise, another participant recommended,

We really need to have younger people move into this. We really need to train; there's a training component. If I were in the Ministry, if I were advising the CEO and looking at this for the next five years, there are a number of scholarships that I'd want to purposely channel and get some young people into this because we want to place them strategically, where they can provide the expertise. There're some technical expertise you can't run away from and that needs to happen. (T#13:LINE1332)

Solving the problem of local expertise is one issue, but there was another concern raised with respect to small population size—the issue of impartiality. As one participant explained, “We are a small population, so nine out of ten chances you will know your reviewers and there's easily a possibility that people will start to think about personal grievances and so on, so that might be a problem” (T#1:LINE421). Another participant noted, “Because everybody knows one another, they might want to let down the system for certain people” (T#11:LINE527). A third participant explained the potential problem as follows:

The closer you look at evaluation, the more frightened you can become because evaluation is not easy. It's so easy to make a mistake. It's so easy to because there are so many variables when you send in a team to look: “Who are these people in

the team? What kind of training do they have?” The smallness of Belize will be a factor, inevitably. “Were they graduates from that institution?” (T#13:LINE1242)

However, most participants did not see the issue as a reason not to establish a local system or to use local people in evaluating institutions. For example, one participant made the following comment:

In Belize, everybody knows everyone. How do you tell me as a dean that, “Hey, your faculty ain’t cutting it?” [That] might create a problem, but I feel that once people are trained in what they’re supposed to do and they have the credentials to show that they’re trained in what they’re supposed to do, I feel that the institutions will respect that body. I feel that a lot of times it’s not the body that they disrespect, it’s the person. A lot of things in Belize, it’s personality, it’s not about whether or not you should go there, it’s the person that you put there and getting people who are fair....I can’t believe that we don’t have people who think fairly and who can think independent[ly]. (T#14:LINE666)

Likewise, another participant stated,

I don’t think the fact that the country is small and everybody knows everybody is a problem. I don’t think so. That raises the whole issue of integrity of our professionals. We have very good people in this country, people that have integrity in whatever they say and in whatever they decide. You don’t have to sell your soul to satisfy other people. I feel we could create that here. (T#15:LINE677)

The need for a cultural shift was made clear by many participants. One participant commented, “Within higher education, we have to be impartial and we have to be professional and that is where it will start, but it’s the mindset that we have to cultivate” (T#5:LINE691). Another participant stated, “We’re not use to a culture of external review, so we ourselves would have to grow comfortable with it...” (T#1:LINE419).

Other similar comments included the following:

I find as Belizeans we don’t like to be evaluated at all. When it is evaluation time [we] cringe as if we’ve been doing evil all along and somebody’s coming to see it now when that shouldn’t be the case. (T#16:LINE612)

Just getting our Belizean people, people living here, working in Belize, at this institution and other higher institutions to buy into the practice of reflecting on



what you're doing is a challenge, because a lot of people don't have that culture of reflection, of introspection, of putting your product out there and asking the world to evaluate it so you can improve. It is not an easy thing and it would take some adjustment on the part of many. So there is the buying into the culture of planning, assessment, reflection; that will take a while. (T#4:LINE667)

Several participants expressed the expectation that there would be some level of resistance by institutions to the establishment of an external quality assurance system. For example, one person explained,

We have been so used to doing what we want, how we want.... that people will not be happy in an external body coming in to assess whether or not I am delivering and I am providing the quality that I should provide....They will see it more as invading their privacy.... so the buy-in would be the biggest challenge, in terms of how do you get people to see that this is important because there might be a lot of resistance and there might be a lot of opposition....people will start resisting because they have to change the way they do things. (T#14:LINE652)

Another participant predicted,

You will have some resistance from institutions and I guess one of the reasons for that, might be lack of knowledge of the importance of an accountability system [and] lack of resources. I'm sure institutions are going to say, "Well, where will I get the funding for this?" But if you're looking at the value, then you're going to put money where there is value. I think if we start seeing things that way, we're going to spend. If it's worth spending on, then we're not going to hesitate putting the money there because it's going to bring great benefits to our students, to our institutions, and to some extent, in fact to a large extent, to the faculty that we have and the entire support system that we have in our schools. (T#15:LINE757)

In overcoming resistance, the need to "change the mindset of our educators"

(T#8:LINE467) was mentioned by several participants. One participant suggested the following:

We have to educate people. You have to dialogue. People will have a lot of questions, a lot of concerns. It is important for our decision-makers, our policy-makers to listen to the people and to take their feedback seriously and to address it or at least appear to be addressing it. That's important. It is important for them to understand the change process and what it will take for change to be effected, that it's going to be something that for the most part is not within the Belizean culture and so it will require time, a lot of education, a lot of buying into and a lot of empowerment. (T#4:LINE675)

*Government: Power Brokers for Quality*

The idea that external quality assurance should be managed by an autonomous body was underscored by many participants and invariably, that autonomy was discussed in reference to ties with government. One participant declared, “I don’t particularly like the idea of having a government creature created for this purpose...” (T#13:LINE991). Another participant added, “The accreditation council needs to be an independent body. We don’t want political bureaucracy” (T#5:LINE546). Other participants made similar comments such as, “I wouldn’t want to see that [agency] directly linked to any government department, completely independent” (T#15:LINE652). Another one offered, “I think it should be a non-political thing.... made up of fairly neutral people” (T#2:LINE617).

Even though many participants expressed uneasiness with having government in control of external quality assurance, most did see some sort of role for government within the system. One participant explained,

I think it should be independent from the government but government should have a strong representation. ATLIB should have a strong representation, the public, the private sector, basically the whole country, NGO’s, yeah. I think it should be a body that is complete.... Not just Ministry and not excluding Ministry either. (T#6:LINE420)

Another participant explained the necessity of government’s involvement as follows:

If there isn’t a legal mandate, people won’t do it on their own and, in that respect, I would admit that, then, an agency like government would have to play a role to establish the legal mandate for that. Thereafter, within the same system, establish some kind of incentive program where the institution will begin to strive for excellence. Government cannot be taken out of it, but that is not to be perceived that government is in control. I think that the actual executive, the body that is doing the monitoring and assessments, will have to be a body of professionals of integrity. It will have to be above scrutiny. (T#7:LINE575)

The idea of some kind of partnership with government was mentioned by other participants as well. For example one participant made the following comment about how she saw an external quality assurance system being governed:

If all our institutions were government-owned, I would say, well, totally government, but we are a partnership, so whereas government has a responsibility and maybe should be the bearer of the greater part of it, particularly since we want to develop national standards and set some criteria for achieving those, there has to be a partnership. I think institutions should get together and say what would be good for us because you need a buy-in and if it's totally government we will find hundred and one faults... and we will blow it off fairly easily. Whereas if we, as the leaders in the individual institutions, sat down and said, 'Now how would we want to be measured and how do we measure ourselves?', they can feed that into whatever structure the government would derive. Like I said, the government might have the ultimate responsibility to help in the development of that system, but it should not be done without collaborative effort. (T#1:LINE334)

Participants' views on what specific role government should play in external quality assurance ranged from endorser to enforcer and from quiet participant to chief funder. One participant declared, "I wouldn't want it to be the government [in control of external quality assurance], but I would want their financial backing for it."

(T#12:LINE339) She was not alone in those sentiments; in fact, many participants indicated that they believe that the bulk of funding for external quality assurance should come from government. For example, one participant claimed that external quality assurance "would have to be heavily subsidized by the government" (T#1:LINE446).

There were many comments in support of this view. For example, one participant explained,

At the end of the day, whatever we are doing, it is for the benefit of our nation and as such tax payer's money can also be channeled through for the benefit of what we do and if that [external quality assurance] body will always be accountable to the institution down here and to the Ministry up there, then I believe public funding could be used. (T#8:LINE378)

Although the majority of participants suggested that government fund all, most, or some of the cost of an external quality assurance system, there was one participant who disagreed with the idea of having government fund the system. She gave the following explanation:

If you don't want them [government] to run the show, don't ask them to pay....we like to continue to think that we have to beg for everything. We can pay. Each of us can say "You know what? This requires a dollar from each student per semester so that we can put a thousand dollars or three thousand dollars." Students can pay an extra dollar per semester for the review, the assessment. We can do it. (T#17:LINE587)

In addition to having representation on an autonomous body and possibly funding the system, a few participants also envisioned other roles for the government. For example, a couple of participants suggested that there be a split of external quality assurance into a registration component and an evaluation component, with the former being the responsibility of the government. Here are their comments:

In terms of meeting the minimum requirements to operate, I see that as a state function, Ministry of Education...but in terms of evaluating your program, I would want to put that beyond the reach of the politicians as best as possible and even meeting the minimal standards, I see that as an imperative of the state that cannot be imbued with favor at all; so while it is state-sanctioned, it cannot be state-issued in terms of doing the inspection and so on. The recommendation must be forwarded to them and they must believe in the people whom they have appointed to do the checking and granting. (T#4:LINE341)

The registration [part] could be done through the government because the government is the only entity that would have that kind of muscle. Even if there is the risk that the government might politicize it and might choose to close an eye on one institution and yet apply it on the other institution, that is the risk you take, but I don't know that there's another entity with that kind of authority. (T#13:LINE1043)

A couple of participants advocated for even greater government involvement. For example, one said, "Somebody has to take the main initiative and I have to say that it's

the Ministry because there has to be a legal basis... a mandate” (T#7:LINE658). Another participant stated,

I feel that the Ministry of Education should take the leading role in ensuring quality...I think you want a body that ensures quality from beginning to end, I mean from pre-school to tertiary. That’s how I feel that should happen, and within the Ministry, that’s where I would see the external body operating, so that they are really the advising body to the Ministry and in there you have capable people who can effectively assess quality at the tertiary level. (T#14:LINE432)

One participant expressed the view that government control of external quality assurance would happen by default. He explained,

If we had a well-functioning ATLIB association, that’s where something like this would come out from, because it’s natural progression that you want to improve standards and quality in institutions. In the absence of that, I think it’s going to be more government mandating it. I don’t see any non-governmental organizations there. What I would recommend is that whosoever is responsible that they look closely at what is being offered, but not in isolation, in taking into account the issue of higher education policy, of where education is going in Belize, et cetera, because we seem to be more and more falling into the trap that we have to meet CSME standards for example... and that’s essential to allow for transitioning of people outside, but do these harmonization activities meet the goals and needs of a nation? I think there’s a big ‘if’ there, and I would venture to say that in reality they don’t. (T#3:LINE422)

Although the previous participant showed little faith in ATLIB’s ability to take charge of the process, one participant expressed a different view:

I think I’ve always felt proud as an educator in Belize that a lot of progress that has been made in the system has come from the educators themselves. I mean, it wasn’t the government who set up ATLIB. That came from deans recognizing that such a body is needed.... So I would want to see it coming from the deans, from the institutions because they’re on the inside. You know what you battle with everyday. I think it would be more practical then, than having people who are not really in the education system or who left it long, long ago and probably want to dictate something that’s not relevant now or assume things are probably as easy as they were ten, twenty years ago in the educational system. (T#12:LINE345)

Even if the government does not have direct control over external quality assurance, based on the current funding mechanism, there is the potential for the

government to have substantial indirect control over institutional participation. One such scenario would be for the government to use its financial muscle to mandate that publicly-funded or aided institutions register or participate in an external quality assurance system. Another would be to use the system to make decisions regarding funding.

On the issue of making participation in external quality assurance voluntary or compulsory for institutions, participants seemed to support the latter in most cases. For example, comments were made such as “I don’t see how it can be voluntary. It would have to be required” (T#1:LINE351), “I do believe it should be compulsory” (T#9:LINE555), and “My gut feeling is that we make it mandatory... for all institutions.... how else would the quality be determined?” (T#15:LINE722). Other participants who support the idea of compulsory or mandatory participation offered various explanations such as the following:

When you look at this country and what is needed, you cannot allow it [external quality assurance] to be voluntary, which means it will be changed every year with the political parties and government. That’s dangerous. We need to have something in place which we could agree to is a necessary requirement. Imagine if ATLIB, all the tertiary institutions, agree that this is necessary for our country, then who after that should say they don’t want to belong? (T#10:LINE1003)

Belize is small and I feel that religion plays an extremely big part in Belize and I think if you go that way [a voluntary system] you will end up with some institutions deciding that they will not go with the accreditation and they are so powerful... they can stand on their own without the government’s assistance and they will find creative ways of doing that; So I feel that in the case of Belize, you’ll want it to be compulsory, that people must, once you’ve started an institution, these are the things that you must have in order to even decide that you can do that. (T#14:LINE600)

I think that it [participation in external quality assurance] should be mandatory. I think a lot of people could use education institutions as a hustling thing. We know about the fly-by-night medical schools trying to pitch their tents here in Belize. I think it would have to mandatory. (T#16:LINE575)

Some participants made no distinction in which institutions should be mandated to participate, “If you’re in Belize and you say you want to set standards for Belize then we all qualify” (T#1:LINE356), but at least one participant saw things differently, stating that participation should only be “compulsory for the institutions that are helped by the state” (T#6:LINE444). Several participants also made a distinction between various aspects of external quality assurance. For example, one participant suggested that the system be “compulsory with respect to minimum requirements; the voluntary part would be the reaching excellence” (T#7:LINE620). Another one rationalized, “Because it has financial implications, as far as accrediting programs, that I think has to be voluntary. When it comes to meeting the minimum conditions to operate, you don’t have a choice with that” (T#4:LINE614). Other participants made similar statements:

I think the control part of it must be compulsory. It should be mandatory; mandatory in the sense that if you start a program at junior college to offer Agriculture, you must have a person with a degree in Agriculture to teach; I can’t put a Biology person to teach Agriculture. There has to be some basic criteria.... if there is a minimum acceptable level and that the institution knows that they’re meeting that level and they’re opening up, then [there is] no problem.  
(T#2:LINE564)

The Accreditation Council Act requires the accreditation council to both register or license the institutions and then confer accreditation on them or not. I think that the licensing or recognition or registering, that must be compulsory and there must be a set of criteria....If you are going to receive public monies, if you want your graduates to be recognized in terms of salaries and so on and all the benefits by the government, you have to be licensed and registered and you pay for that. Then accreditation would then be voluntary, but I think that people will want, and schools ought to want, to have that status. (T#5:LINE693)

Alternatively, a few participants supported the idea of voluntary participation in the entire external quality assurance system. As one participant explained, “I believe strongly that you get better results, even if not everyone participates, from it being voluntary, because sooner or later the benefits of membership will become very evident

and it's the customers who will insist" (T#13:LINE1015). Other participants shared similar views, such as the following:

I think it makes more sense when people belong because they want to belong. We don't want to go the way of the Minister signing on to the Accreditation Act and then nothing happens or you force people, they drag their feet [or] they don't meet the deadlines. You belong; there are benefits to you belonging and then others will come on board when they're ready. (T#17:LINE599)

Voluntary involvement into this [external quality assurance] should be entertained because, at the end of the day even though if everything is in place, coming in, you will definitely know that there are things to be gained in the process...the teamwork is crucial and that requires if you want to accomplish something, the voluntary spirit. I go in there because I am interested. I know that there are certain things that I can contribute to make these things work for the benefit, not of myself, but for the broader population and if I contemplate that, and I move in the direction of that aspect, then I believe much more can be accomplished. Because when things are pushed, I will do [only] so much. I will just do to comply with and that's it, but if it comes from that spirit, then you will want to see how you can take it to the next level or higher and that's my view in terms of if something like this should come in, open it for a more voluntary approach. (T#8:LINE397)

One participant put the issue in this way, "You should probably have an option not to participate, but not participating should probably be tied in with government funding, that if you're not participating, then, maybe you should not be getting government funds" (T#12:LINE427).

Participants were asked during the interviews about their views on this particular issue—whether or not public funding should be tied to the results of external quality assurance. Many participants expressed support for the idea of linking public funding with participation in external quality assurance. Here are a few of the rationales they offered:

If government would say, "I'm not forcing you to belong but the ones who are part of this will get \$1.00 to your 75 cents. For every dollar [they get], you get 75 cents. So they won't say they'll take away the money completely but they would put more resources in structures that want to work, want to be the best quality, want to turn out the best students, look after its faculty, look after the



infrastructure, et cetera, et cetera. That's what you do and it works. We know it's when people feel it in their pockets that they do something. (T#17:LINE607)  
 I think if you don't meet the minimum requirements you shouldn't even be operating, not at all...I don't expect government to put any of the public's money, whether through scholarships or subventions in any institution that has not at least met the minimum requirements to operate—not even scholarships to students. I think [that] is great incentive to at least get your resources, your people, your infrastructure, your quality assurance plans, and so on in place so that you can meet the requirements to operate, [be]cause it is only then that funds from GOB would come. I think the government need[s] to be such good stewards of the public purse that they should ensure that the money will follow where the quality is and, in that case, at least [ensure that] the minimum requirements to operate [are met]. (T#4:LINE632)

Most participants, though, called for a more cautious approach. For example, one participant explained, “I wouldn't want to see a blanket thing, because the institutions that need to improve might need more help financially, so if you cut off the very lifeline, then you're just contributing to the further deterioration of the school” (T#1:LINE378).

She continued,

So I would say it can be tied but with care and ...the whole external report would have to be designed more towards showing the institutions ways that they can bring themselves up to this standard that you're trying to look for or trying to aim for rather than, you haven't met this so you won't get that. (T#1:LINE385)

Similar sentiments were echoed in the following statements from various participants:

If you have already started something, I don't think it is right to stop it, but maybe you have to have a plan of how you are going to fix it...let us find a solution to fix the problem. Don't give them anything else until they fix the problem, but give them what they need to fix the problem, because you can't just stop their funding. It's wrong, you know? It's not the school that will suffer; it's the students that are going to suffer and the parents that are paying for the students. (T#2:LINE579)

They have to be careful with that ...for example, if you have a set of standards, you have to have a library with X amount of square footage, with X amount of volumes per program, et cetera and they say if you don't do that your funding will be cut by ten percent but for the institution to meet that mandate, you have to raise fees, for example, but then you tell me I can't raise fees so you're put in a bind where, if you're not careful when you set these standards tied to these funding, you're going to have problems in terms of its implementation and rather than helping the institution you might further allow for the deterioration of their

programs.... I would certainly look at that; I would have to look at it very carefully before I would begin to support that. (T#3:LINE399)

The idea of providing assistance to institutions that fall short of expectations was common in the responses of participants. Here are a couple of their comments:

It has to go through a long process, a lot of discussion. It's like an evaluation. You would sit down and talk about it and come up with a plan and obviously the institution is the way it is because maybe we can't do better or we don't know, so I think we have to have a body who would be advising the institution. 'Alright here's the problem, how can we fix this?' and they can give ideas because they have seen all the other institutions.... So that body will know what everybody is doing and can say, 'You know what? This how another institution is doing it?' And we could share and improve. (T#6:LINE455)

If you don't participate then you cannot exist. If you don't meet the criteria then you set up a system to help you meet the criteria. I think we must also be as inclusive as possible at trying to help membership to maintain their certification rather than it being a disciplinary, spanking thing.... I've seen punitive actions of the sort and I don't find them to be effective. (T#16:LINE601)

Participants were more likely to support punitive consequences for institutions if they remain non-compliant after having been given adequate time and support. For example, one participant explained,

You need to have a system that says if you do not meet [the standards] I'll give you the tools now. Most likely you can't cut cane because you don't have a machete. Let me give you the machete now, but if you still don't cut cane, then something is wrong. (T#9:LINE662)

Other participants agreed with this view:

If it is standards you're trying to establish, you have to allow for the institutions to address the findings. I don't think the results should be punitive, [such as] to say, 'You didn't meet the assessment criteria or the assurance of quality, close down this institution!' ... I don't even know if it's a last resort because there are ways that you can always improve an institution, so the closure of an institution should not be the outcome. The results, rather, should be used as a means of guiding the development of the individual institutions and perhaps they could have time-lines on it, maybe to say, 'You have this amount of time to address these areas' and then have a subsequent review to see if progress is made before the official next date when another assessment would be done. The only way I could see it working as a closure of institution is after you have been given that additional

time and then you go back to that institution and nothing has changed, then I would think, there might be room for the government or whichever agency to say, ‘Get your act together and then start offering programs again,’ because then you could be doing more harm than good. (T#1:LINE359)

Having a body at the top, I think, will help to evaluate all schools because it’s not easy to close them once they have started, but by pointing out that you are not meeting this [standard], your quality needs to improve, not just saying it, but showing them the areas and giving them time and then if you cannot improve, then we suggest you amalgamate, be taken over or whatever so that the students will gain. (T#10:LINE916)

In summary, although participants advocated for an external quality assurance system that is independent of the government in terms of the authority to make decisions regarding the quality of programs and institutions, as one participant noted, “Having a body... that would be free from the long arms of political manipulation to do a proper assessment and make their report without fear or favor, might be a challenge” (T#4:LINE554). Despite the strong call for autonomy, the collective vision appears to be a system that is dependent on government to initiate the process, legally mandate participation, and use its financial resources to effect compliance.

Ironically, as one participant noted, “...both major political parties are not in any rush whatsoever, none. The previous government didn’t want to touch it; the current government is pretty much saying that they don’t think that it’s doable” (T#13:LINE1058). In spite of those sentiments, institutional leaders have placed the onus on the government to make the next move on external quality assurance. As one participant declared, “We need government to buy into it ...as ATLIB we have been talking a lot about it, learning about it ...but I’m not sure that the government has really bought into it fully as yet” (T#12:LINE473). She continued, “We definitely need government support to get going” (T#12:LINE481). Therefore, political will may be the

greatest challenge to the implementation and sustainability of an external quality assurance system in Belize.

***Research Question #4—Implications for the NACB Act***

What implications do these conceptual and contextual issues have for the quality assurance system proposed by the National Accreditation Council of Belize Act?

*Alignment with Purpose and Funding*

As previously mentioned, clarifying the purpose of an external quality assurance scheme is the first step in choosing the right model for quality assurance (Gates et al., 2002). Chapter 12 Section 1 of the NACB Act (2005) states the following:

The functions of the Council shall be to promote the advancement of education in Belize to ensure that the quality of education delivered in Belize meets the standards set by the Council for the qualifications and certificates conferred and that the appropriate standards are being maintained and improved; to protect the interests of students and potential students; and to promote the free movement of skills and knowledge across the region.

The Act provides the Council with the legal authority to

take such measures as are deemed appropriate in order to ensure that all programmes and courses delivered in Belize meet the academic and professional standards required, and that educational quality is continuously enhanced; to provide service of public information regarding publicly and privately offered post secondary education... (NACB Act, 2005, p. 745)

Thus, the Council is supposed to serve three different functions: (a) quality control—by ensuring set standards are maintained, (b) quality improvement—by ensuring continuous improvement of standards, and (c) accountability—by protecting the interests of students and the public.

Participants in the study identified the need for an external quality assurance system to regulate entry of institutions within the higher education sector and monitor their adherence to minimum standards. They also saw a need for a system that would

function to ensure that institutions improved their quality beyond these minimum standards so that the sector could achieve high levels of effectiveness and efficiency. The need for institutions to be more responsive and accountable to stakeholders was also mentioned by several participants. Consequently, there appears to be alignment between the Act and participants' perceptions regarding purpose of external quality assurance.

Funding, which was a major concern cited by participants, is dealt with in the Act in Section 16 which states,

- The funds and resources of the Council shall consist of -
- (a) such amounts as may be appropriate[d] by the national Assembly;
  - (b) special grants or funds as may from time to time be provided by Government for the financing of special projects and activities;
  - (c) sums arising from grants or donations ;
  - (d) all monies received by the Council for or in connection with the carrying out of its functions; and
  - (e) all property and assets acquired by the Council.

Thus the Act implies that a large portion of the costs of operating the Council is expected to come from government. It also allows for the Council to collect fees for its services. Both of these sources are consistent with the suggestions expressed by participants on how an external quality assurance system could be funded and thus there also appears to be alignment between the Act and participants' perceptions regarding sources of funding.

#### *Discord over Affiliation*

Participants made it clear that they wanted a system that was autonomous but with input, cooperation, and representation from the government and other stakeholders. As written, the NACB Act (2005) calls for a Council that is managed by an eleven-member board of directors, comprised of two representatives from ATLIB, one from the Technical and Vocational Education and Training sector, two from professional

associations, two from employer organizations, three from government, and an executive director.

Section 4 of the Act, gives the Board the power to elect its own Chairperson and Vice-Chairperson from among its members and subsection 10 states that “The Board shall have power to regulate its own proceedings.” Section 6 subsection 3 states that “The Board may make regulations governing its proceedings and the conduct of its business.” Decisions of the Board are made based on the majority of voting members, with the Chair casting a second vote in cases of an equality of votes. The Board also has the power to

Establish the requirements which institutions must satisfy in order to be registered with, have their programmes accredited, re-accredited and validated in the case of new programmes or have their awards recognized by the Council. (Section 13, subsection b)

Nevertheless, participants’ desire for an autonomous system appears to be at odds with the Act as it is currently written. The system described in the Act is, to a large extent, government-controlled. This is different from the fully independent or quasi-governmental model envisioned by participants. For example, all board members, as well the executive director of the Council, are to be appointed by the Minister of Education (NACB Act, 2005, Section 4). Section 32 states that regulations made by the Board must have the approval of the Minister and Section 14 subsection 1 of the Act states that the

Council shall report to the Minister, as often as may be required and not less than annually, giving advice on the quality and standards of post-secondary educational provision in Belize, and the fitness or otherwise of institutions to offer educational and training services, to receive public funds and otherwise practice in Belize.

Section 15 of the Act also states that “The Minister may, after consultation with the Chairperson, give to the Council in writing such directions of a general policy nature as appear to the Minister to be necessary in the public interest” and Section 5 states that the

Minister may “terminate the appointment of the Executive Director by giving six months notice in writing or in the case of serious misconduct, without notice.”

Thus, although the various stakeholder groups are allowed to nominate their representatives, the final nod of approval must come from the Minister of Education. In practice, the appointment by a Minister is merely a matter of formality, but if the letter of the law is exercised, the Minister of Education has the power to control who serves on the Council’s board and to determine who serves in the capacity as executive director and for how long. Such a system could result in political interference into the business of the Council. For example, the Act places the Executive Director in potential conflicting roles where loyalty may be split between the Board, to whom the director is supposed to report, and the Minister, who under the Act, has the power to terminate the director’s services at will.

These provisions also have the potential to force politically-driven changes in policies and practices within institutions. Although accreditation is defined by the Act as “usually voluntary,” Section 14 implies that if the government decides to use accredited status as a criterion for public funding of programs or institutions, local institutions may have no choice but to participate in the process. Coincidentally, many participants expressed the view that all institutions should be required to participate, especially in the quality control (meeting minimum requirements) aspect; however, some participants did advocate for a voluntary and more lenient approach.

One issue that the majority of participants seemed to strongly agree on was the need for the system to be fair and non-political. One participant explained,

In Belize we know that politics does play a role.... politicians jump up and want to open schools and a school is opened with no regard for quality and what that

means. They don't even have an understanding [of] what quality is; they just want a junior college because it's in their constituency and it's a plum, it's a good campaign offering. (T#5:LINE509)

It appears that even with a functioning Council, this is not a problem that will go away.

While the Act gives the Council the power to “deprive institutions or providers of any approval recognition or title granted or conferred on them,” the Minister retains the power to issue “licenses, charters or other authorizations to institutions and providers to operate or to continue their operations” (Section 13, subsection 1). The Council appears to have no power other than to advise the Minister on such matters. This provision has the potential to undermine the credibility of the Council and deny it the legal teeth mentioned by several participants as necessary for the system to work.

#### *Contextual Considerations*

The NACB Act (2005) establishes and incorporates the National Accreditation Council of Belize, it sets out the composition of the Board, and describes its powers and functions; however, there is much more to a quality assurance system. No regulations on the type of evaluation (i.e., self-studies, assessments or audits), the unit of analysis (i.e., program, department, or institution), the persons involved in the evaluation, and how results will be reported have been developed as yet. The cost to participating institutions is also yet to be determined.

Systems based on individual institutional missions and focused on improvement rather than accountability, such as in the U.S. Regional Accreditation system, usually rely on the existence of mature institutions that have the capacity to evaluate themselves, enough financial resources to fund the operations of the accrediting body, and a large enough pool of expertise to conduct the peer review process. Serious consideration has to



be given to the current ability of Belizean institutions to evaluate themselves and to contribute to the external quality assurance system either by way of finance or human resources.

Institutions reported serious resource constraints. One participant noted, “Maintaining quality costs money and schools, especially ours, doesn’t have that money...” (T#5:LINE169). Another mentioned, “Right now, the institution has no more classroom space, no more office space. We have no more lab space. If we grow by another 10% in August, we will have to rent classrooms” (T#13:LINE678). Inadequate facilities were observed during site visits and were also highlighted by many of the participants. Several institutions were depending on assistance from the government, international donor agencies, or foreign affiliates to fund needed expansions and improvements in facilities.

Passing on the expenses for major development and expansion projects to students is not an option for most institutions. One participant explained the dilemma as follows:

We have a set subvention from the government that hasn’t changed, at least [not] for the past four years. While it’s not enough, at least it hasn’t decreased, so that’s one good thing to know. However, what has impeded [us] from being able to obtain additional funding is our inability or lack of authorization to restructure our tuition and fees, and that’s a government mandate... (T#3:LINE297)

Staffing is also a major constraint. One participant mentioned, “In Belize we don’t have the expertise needed to develop full-fledged programs in many areas, and so that already is a limiting factor” (T#7:LINE118). Not only is institutional expertise limited, they are also stretched thin. One participant commented,

I think, quite frankly, the teaching assignments at university level is not at the level at which I would want to support and by that I mean if we are going to do

justice to academic quality, we cannot have a teacher having five course preparation per semester and still be responsible for research and service. (T#3:LINE275)

The problem also exists in junior colleges, as one dean explained,

It's simply a financial issue. In fact, for us to be able to make this institution financially solvent, teachers have a full-time load...of 18. It is manageable...but I also recognize that with assigning a faculty member 18 credit hours as a full load, I cannot reasonably expect that faculty member to be holding other academic duties. (T#7:LINE76)

The problem is further compounded by the fact that "moonlighting" appears to be a common practice. So in addition to the 15 or 18 hours, full-time faculty members often serve as adjunct faculty members at their own or other institutions. The impact is clear:

We rely heavily on adjunct and our faculty members also do a lot of adjunct; so they teach over and beyond their work[load], which really impacts on our ability to complete the activities of [the] Quality Assurance Office. We are always behind in our deliverables. So for next school year I'm pushing for increase of staff. (T#14:LINE195)

If faculty members do not have time to do more than teach, then it becomes difficult to build a culture of collaboration, reflection, and improvement within an institution. At one institution where quality assurance measures are being implemented, the need for increased human and technological resources has become apparent. One participant commented,

I was telling my Chair, we need a special person on board with reduced teaching load to be responsible for QA activities because almost every week there's something and the faculty have classes to teach, so it lends to some frustration and a lot of work on the side. (T#16:LINE235)

Another participant at the same institution also noted,

When you look at accreditation standards and how accreditation is normally conducted, there's a huge requirement for documentation. You have to be able to be able to think it out well ahead of time.... Now if I am not in the habit of keeping this kind of record, we won't make it. So already, I'm anticipating that need to set up some information files and I can't do it manually. We wouldn't

have space here to put all of that stuff and so I need to do it digitally...  
(T#13:LINE81)

Overall, the external quality assurance system envisioned by institutional leaders, and which would complement the system's historical and social context, is at odds with the current economic and political realities in Belize. An autonomous, non-governmental evaluation system would require large inputs of time and financial and human resources which are not currently available to institutions. Such a system would also require less government control than is currently the case. Government control over the ability of institutions to raise tuition and fees is an obvious example but there are less overt ways in which control can be exercised. For example, one participant commented, "The level of governments' participation in decision-making at this institution is horrendous and it's not direct, it's not official, most of it is very indirect" (T#13:LINE994). The National Accreditation Council of Belize Act (2005) sets up a system that could easily be used to maintain this status quo.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusion**

### ***Overview of Study***

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore quality assurance practices and perspectives within Belizean higher education institutions. 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 (a) How is higher education quality conceptualized in Belize’s higher education institutions? (b) How do Belizean institutions currently assure (assess, monitor, improve) quality? (c) How do academic leaders regard the proposed implementation of an external quality assurance system? and (d) What implications do these conceptual and contextual issues have for the quality assurance system proposed by the National Accreditation Council of Belize Act?

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 study generated data on the perceptions of academic leaders and institutional quality assurance practices using formal in-depth interviews with 17 senior academic administrators from the junior college and university sectors, analysis of documents related to institutional policies and practice, and on-site visits to each institution.

### ***Significance of Study***

This study is the first broad-based research done on quality assurance practices and perspectives in Belizean higher education institutions. It is timely as the government of the day contemplates whether or not to implement the National Accreditation Council

of Belize Act. Information on how institutional leaders perceive quality, how they currently assure quality within their institutions, and their vision of external quality assurance can help policymakers to plan a way forward.

### ***Relationship of Findings to Theory and Literature***

*How is higher education quality conceptualized in Belize's higher education institutions?*

Harvey and Green (1993a) classified definitions of quality higher education into five categories—*exceptionality, perfection or consistency, fitness for purpose, value for money* and *transformation*. In Belize, quality higher education is conceptualized in both traditional and contemporary terms. Belizean higher education institutions value the idea of excellence (exceptionality) and pursue excellence through mechanisms such as student achievement on external examinations and the adoption of standards used in more well-established higher education systems.

In addition to these traditional, institution-centered approaches, most institutions appear to be responding to their social, economic, and national contexts by redefining what quality education is and placing a growing emphasis on responding to national needs (fitness-for-purpose) and preparing students to function as productive citizens and individuals (transformation). These are more student-centered, contemporary approaches. If one were to define higher education quality based on the findings of this study, it would probably read as follows: “The degree to which an institution or academic program is able help students achieve academic excellence, meet internationally-recognized standards, and function effectively in their personal and professional lives.”

*How do Belizean institutions currently assure (assess, monitor, improve) quality?*

Dill (1999) claimed that institutions must become academic learning organizations to be able to function effectively in a quality assurance environment. Characteristics of academic learning organizations include a *culture of evidence in problem solving, coordination of teaching units, learning from others, university-wide coordination of learning and transferring knowledge*. Currently, Belizean higher education institutions do not have adequate structures and systems in place to assure quality. The data suggest that institution size, as defined by student enrollment, is a major factor in the level of academic organization, institution-wide coordination and formal policy adoption found within institutions. Institutions with larger enrollments are more likely to have three or four levels of academic administration, institution-wide academic councils and formal policies for curriculum development and faculty evaluation. In general, data needed to inform decisions on curriculum development and student learning are not collected either in a scientific manner or on a consistent basis.

Nevertheless, the findings suggest that academic leaders are willing to learn from other colleagues and institutions, both local and international. Through borrowing, institutions are able to obtain and implement curriculum materials that, at least at surface value, are similar in quality (even if not as culturally relevant) as those in place at more well-established institutions and systems. A newer and more promising strategy is collaboration. Local collaboration, in particular, has the advantage over borrowing of developing quality structures and processes that are contextually relevant and viable. Also, the practice can easily result in the quick transfer of useful knowledge throughout the system. Therefore, although at this stage in their development Belizean higher

education institutions do not truly reflect the characteristics of academic learning organizations, there are some promising practices being put in place.

*How do academic leaders regard the proposed implementation of an external quality assurance system?*

The International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP, 2007a; 2007b) has advised small states to consider several major organizational choices in setting up external quality assurance systems. These include the purpose or *purposes* of the quality assurance agency (i.e., whether it will be quality control, accountability/guidance, or improvement), its *affiliation* (i.e., whether it will be governmental, quasi-governmental, or owned by the higher education institutions or by private groups), the *general approaches* (for example, whether participation will be compulsory or voluntary), and *linkage to public funding* (i.e., whether there will be direct public funding of the system, public incentives for positive outcomes, or no connection to public funding).

Participants expressed the view that it is necessary to implement an external quality assurance system that can accomplish all three purposes—controlling quality, fostering quality improvement, and making institutions accountable to the public; however, they identified the greatest need as that of establishing minimum standards and monitoring entry into the system (quality control). Although academic leaders would prefer an external quality assurance system that is independent of government, they see government as a major player in the establishment and sustainability of the system. Thus their vision is for a quasi-governmental entity that would be funded by the government, but be fully autonomous in its operations.

Most participants also said that they would prefer a system that is compulsory (especially in regard to meeting minimum standards) but were wary about tying the results of external quality assurance to public funding. Academic leaders would rather see a more cautious approach be taken where institutions are provided with sufficient time and the support to meet standards before more drastic measures are taken.

*What implications do these conceptual and contextual issues have for the quality assurance system proposed by the National Accreditation Council of Belize Act?*

Gates et al. (2002) identified a number of factors that need to be considered in choosing the right model of quality assessment. These include *purposes of assessment, level of authority, level of resources, centralization of operations, system heterogeneity and provider complexity.*

*Purposes of assessment.* The purposes stated in the National Accreditation Council of Belize Act ([NACB Act], 2005) are in line with those of the participants; however, there is no clear indication of which purpose would be emphasized in an operational council. Furthermore, the views of stakeholders other than academic leaders also need to be taken into consideration to determine their alignment with what is proposed by the NACB Act.

*Level of authority.* The NACB Act (2005) gives considerable power to the government in determining the persons who run the agency and the level of financial and legal support the agency receives. While participants accept the need for government involvement, their vision of an autonomous body is not realized in the Act as it is currently written.



*Level of resources.* Participants acknowledged that financial and human resource limitations are potential challenges to implementing a quality assurance system in Belize. This has implications for the size and scope of the system that can be implemented and the strategies the agencies can use to accomplish its tasks. Participants suggest a scaled-down system and use of existing structures and partnerships to supplement the Council's resources. The NACB Act (2005) currently calls for an agency with a wide range of functions. These may have to be prioritized in light of the social and economic realities.

*Centralization of operations.* Belize's higher education system is currently decentralized. There is no coordinating body or set of regulations to guide the sector. Although the government of Belize does have considerable legal and financial power over institutions, which it can and does exercise when it sees fit, in practice, institutions are generally free to develop their curriculum, mission and objectives, and policies (non-financial) without the input or approval of the government. Implementing the NACB Act in such an environment can be problematic if an authoritative rather than collaborative approach is taken.

*System heterogeneity and provider complexity.* The total number of higher education institutions operating is fewer than 20 and the majority of institutions are offering degrees in only a few areas and mostly at the Associate's degree level. Therefore, in terms of number of institutions and programs and levels of programs, the system is relatively simple. This should make external quality assurance less complicated than in systems with a larger number of institutions and programs; however, there is considerable heterogeneity in institutional missions, affiliations, and communities served.

Indeed, of the ten institutions in this study, two are classified as government-affiliated, three as community-affiliated, and five as denominational institutions. Some of these institutions resemble Sixth Forms with a primary focus on pure disciplines while others more closely resemble professional or vocational institutes with programs that attempt to meet the needs of their surrounding communities. These communities, in turn, vary greatly in terms of ethnicities, cultural norms and economic activities. Enrollment at institutions also ranges from fewer than 100 students to more than 4,000 students.

Gates et al. (2002) advised that the greater the variance in institutions, the more difficult it is to assess quality or productivity using common indicators. For such systems, the authors recommended a model with flexible criteria, whereby institutions can determine, to some extent, their missions, processes, and outcomes. If adopted in Belize, this approach would help to ensure a continuation of the diverse missions and services which is a current strength of the system, while addressing the lack of quality monitoring and minimum standards, which is a weakness of the system. Although flexibility can be challenging in large systems with little resources, the small number of institutions may make the approach workable in Belize.

A flexible and less prescriptive system may be a choice model for Belize based on cultural and historic factors as well. Higher education developed independent of any regulation or direct guidance from the state. Given this culture of independence, there is certain to be considerable resistance to impositions on institutional missions and practices if a dictatorial approach was chosen. The NACB Act (2005) does not specify the processes that will be used to set standards or make regulations, but the heterogeneity of

missions and affiliations is bound to complicate those processes and so must be done with care.

### *Reflections and Recommendations*

Belize's need for an external quality assurance system is clear. The higher education system is currently unregulated, enrollment continues to grow, new providers are entering the higher education market, and global economic forces necessitate a quality higher education sector. The need for an external quality assurance system does not mean that a system should be implemented without careful consideration given to the context in which that system is expected to operate. This study has brought many of those contextual issues to light.

First and foremost, whatever external quality assurance system develops has to be able to accommodate various concepts and measures of quality for it to earn the support of the majority of academic leaders. Institutional missions must figure prominently in the design of the system. For some institutions this may continue to be academic excellence (e.g., student performance on standardized exams), while others will want more emphasis to be placed on graduate success (e.g., job placement rates, employer and graduate satisfaction surveys, etc.). Furthermore, in a system so used to external borrowing, unless adopted standards are comparable to that of international systems (e.g., SACS or UCJ), respect for the system is not likely to be achieved. The aim should not be a substandard system, but one that can allow institutions, in time, to move from where they currently are to where they ought to be internationally.

Institutional capacity building also has to be a priority since external quality assurance cannot operate in a system where there is no attention to internal quality

assurance. What appears to be the most urgent need is the development and implementation of policies for key quality assurance functions such as curriculum development and review, faculty evaluation and development, and, the area that appears to be most lacking, evaluation of student learning. Continued collaboration through the National Articulation Framework (NAF) or other mechanisms where policies and practices can be shared should be supported and expanded.

Attention also has to be given to designing quality assurance structures for smaller institutions. At these institutions, the relatively small number of programs, students, and faculty may allow quality assurance functions to be accomplished without the need for complex structures. Given the size of the largest institution and what has been accomplished by its one-person quality assurance office, comparable results could be achieved within smaller institutions by qualified part-time persons or full-time employees who are assigned reduced workloads in exchange for assisting with quality assurance functions such as coordinating self-studies.

In terms of external quality assurance, having government substantially fund the system but remain on the periphery might be wishful thinking on the part of academic leaders. As the saying goes, "He who pays the piper calls the tune." There is a certain lack of maturity and initiative within the sector which makes government, by default, poised to be the power broker for quality in higher education. In defense of the sector, most institutions are less than 20 years old, have under-qualified and over-worked faculty, and are under substantial financial pressures due to their inability to increase tuition and fees and the economic problems facing many families. Thus, the fully autonomous, sector-driven external quality assurance system envisioned by many

academic leaders may be several decades away. Additionally, until government gains confidence in the higher education sector's ability to regulate itself, it is unlikely to loosen the reigns.

There are practical problems as well. While most participants feel confident that the issues related to small size can be overcome, the possibility that there will be significant challenges related to small size is real. Some of the more important factors to consider are as follows:

1. *Staffing of the external quality assurance agency*: This must be done with extra care in a small society. Persons holding key positions such as the executive director will need to be above reproach. They must be able to engender confidence and trust in both themselves and the agency. Proper policies and guidelines for the conduct of agency operations must be put in place and strictly monitored for compliance to ensure that the agency gains respect both locally and internationally.
2. *Internal quality assurance infrastructure*: The few institutions that have begun quality review exercises report the need for additional personnel, supporting databases, and changes in institutional culture. These could prove to be formidable challenges if institutions try to go it alone. The small size of most institutions should make it easier for a quality culture to spread throughout the institution and for faculty to take ownership of the process. Therefore, large and elaborate quality assurance structures may be impractical and unnecessary for most institutions. Furthermore, the cost of quality improvements such as

training of personnel and development of databases can be reduced through partnerships and collaboration among institutions.

3. *External Review*: Regardless of the particular model chosen—accreditation, assessment, or audit—external review will be a critical and integral part of the process. There are benefits of using local reviewers because it facilitates knowledge transfer among institutions; however, the increased chance of bias in a small society is real. Therefore, the composition of the review team needs to be considered carefully. As some participants suggested, reviewers need not only be local. A combination of local higher education faculty, professionals from the private or public sector, and foreign experts may be the best way to go. Including expertise from outside of Belize would increase cost, but it would add a great deal of credibility to the process. In any case, since the number of institutions is small and review of institutions or programs would most likely occur in multi-year cycles, the number of reviews in any one year would also be small.

The lessons learned from neighboring countries include paying attention to cultural and historic factors and spending sufficient time promoting education and awareness in order to build support among stakeholders and minimize resistance. There is bound to be opposition unless institutional players (administrators and faculty) see the benefits of quality assurance and feel respected and included in shaping its development. Collaboration between the external quality assurance agency and stakeholders in the development of criteria and design of processes can go a long way in building a sense of shared ownership.

Financing of the system is another dominant factor. It is unlikely that the external quality assurance agency can become operational without substantial investments in infrastructure and training. This is not money that is readily available from either the government or higher education institutions. Loans or grants must be sought for these initial stages. Careful attention must be paid to the size and scope of the agency so that long-term sustainability can be attained. The nature and characteristics of Belize's external quality assurance agency may in the end be similar to the BAC, ACTT and UCJ, but must also be distinctive enough to accommodate the Belizean context.

It is important to note that the various quality assurance functions need not come from one body or at the same time. In the absence of the accreditation council, quality control, the most urgent concern mentioned by participants, may best be left in the hands of the Ministry of Education. This is the function that would precede any quality improvement function and, as several participants point out, would require the legal mandate and support of the government. This can be achieved by adding a few personnel within the Tertiary Unit of the Ministry of Education with specific duties for licensing and institutional monitoring to ensure compliance with minimum standards. The necessary standards can be developed in collaboration with institutions, the private and public sectors, and with input from external quality assurance agencies and experts.

The NAF Committee, currently operating under the auspices of ATLIB, seems to be the most suitable short-term vehicle for quality improvement. The initiative has already evolved from simply comparing courses and programs to the development of model programs and the involvement of faculty from all institutions and programs. Expansion of the Committee's mandate to include quality issues beyond curriculum is not

a far-fetched idea. There are substantial institutional improvements that need to be made to get institutions to the level where they can become comfortable with evaluating themselves and, in the longer run, to being evaluated by outsiders. An informal system of peer evaluation operated through the NAF can serve as a precursor to the work anticipated to take place by the external quality assurance agency. It would be a non-threatening, voluntary, learn-at-your-own-pace strategy that would help institutions get ready for the implementation of a more high-stakes, compulsory system. Also, the process could lead to the development of standards and a pool of reviewers from which the external quality assurance agency could eventually draw.

Whatever the approach, the potential benefits to Belize, its higher education system, and those who depend on the system's services, are enormous. Without effective internal and external quality assurance systems, students will continue to earn degrees that may be of substandard quality and have little currency outside of Belize. Institutions, like the degrees they award, will remain unrecognized regardless of quality. Most importantly, without such systems, Belize will not be able to reap the full benefits of its human capital.

A collaborative approach, led by the Ministry of Education and ATLIB and buttressed by external support, can allow quality assurance in Belizean higher education to materialize in a relatively short period of time; however, several critical barriers need to be overcome. Based on this study, one of the greatest barriers to success seems to be the apparent distrust between the university and junior college subsectors and an even greater level of distrust between the system as a whole and the government. Most



academic leaders appear skeptical about the government's ability to manage a fair and transparent quality assurance system because of the nature of politics in Belize.

Perhaps it is time that this "perspective constraint" (as one participant coined it) is put to the test. After all, if the most educated people in Belize, higher education faculty, staff, and administrators, cannot collaborate with government to build and sustain a system that is of the highest quality and integrity, then what hope does the rest of the country have? An excellent starting point would be the development and implementation of a strategic plan (including a review of the NACB Act) by government, the higher education sector, and other stakeholders with a view to build ownership for quality assurance and to give long-term direction to its development. The time to start this process is now. The longer the process is delayed, the further away the country will be from reaping the full benefits of a quality higher education system.

Specific recommendations for policy makers and institutional leaders are as follows:

#1- Conduct a full review of the National Accreditation Council of Belize Act to address areas that are potentially contentious, to revise the Act where necessary, and to build a sense of ownership for the legislation among stakeholders.

#2- Develop a conceptual framework and comprehensive strategy for internal and external quality assurance in Belizean higher education, outlining the expected goals and timelines for implementation.

#3- Improve the internal quality assurance structures and processes within institutions by building on existing systems and resources and identifying new

ones that will enable institutions to fully participate in and benefit from an external quality assurance system.

### ***Future Research***

Each of the major areas of this research—quality concepts, internal quality assurance practices, and options for external quality assurance—deserve further exploration. Definitions espoused by academic leaders and institutional literature are not necessarily the same as those held by external stakeholders or other stakeholders within institutions. The perspectives of those from institutions that were not included in this study (i.e., private, transnational, and offshore institutions) also need to be taken into account. Future research must include both qualitative and quantitative studies with other stakeholders such as faculty, students, and the private and public sectors as well. Once the concepts and contexts have been thoroughly explored and debated, a comprehensive feasibility study needs to be done to determine the actual cost of establishing and sustaining various options for a national quality assurance system in Belize.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Letter of Request for Institutional Permission

Dear [Name of Person Responsible for Providing Permission]:

My name is Neulin Villanueva and I have been working in higher education in Belize for over seventeen years. Currently, I am pursuing a Ph.D. in Educational Studies at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and I am seeking your assistance in completing a dissertation study which is part of the requirements for the degree. The proposed study is entitled *Assuring Quality in Belizean Higher Education: A Collective Case Study of Institutional Perspectives and Practices*. The purpose of this research is to explore quality assurance practices and perspectives within Belizean higher education institutions.

You are probably aware that the National Accreditation Council Act was passed into law in November of 2004. The Act provides for the establishment of the Belize National Accreditation Council, but to date that Council has not been established. The decision on how to proceed with implementation of the Act or even whether such implementation should proceed needs to be informed by relevant research. Specifically, the proposed research seeks to describe how higher education quality is conceptualized in Belize's higher education institutions; how Belizean institutions currently assure (assess, monitor, improve) quality; and how academic leaders regard the proposed implementation of an external quality assurance system. The research will also examine the implications of these conceptual and contextual issues for the quality assurance system proposed by the Belize National Accreditation Council Act.

The study will incorporate the following data collection strategies: (a) face-to-face interviews with one or more academic administrators at each institution; (b) collection and review of institutional documents related to quality assurance; and (c) an observational tour of pertinent institutional facilities. The data collection and verification phases of the research are scheduled to take place between January and June, 2011. The results of the research will be published as a dissertation study. Once institutional approval is granted, letters requesting participation and additional information about the study will be sent to prospective participants within the institution.

As indicated in the attached letter, the study is being endorsed by the Ministry of Education and Youth. Likewise, the Association of Tertiary Level Institutions in Belize (ATLIB) passed a motion to endorse the study at their meeting on October 8, 2010. These endorsements are significant because the research aims to (a) help policy makers and other stakeholders understand how quality assurance is perceived and practiced in the institutions that comprise the higher education system, and (b) help to guide decision-making on and implementation of a viable and effective external quality assurance system for Belize. Although participation is completely voluntary, it is a goal of the study to include all local higher education institutions because of their uniqueness and the need to generate a comprehensive understanding of the issues. I therefore look forward to the participation of [Name of Institution].

Letters of approval should be written on institution letterhead and include the name of the study (as stated above), statement of willingness to participate, name and signature of the person granting the approval and the date. Please feel free to contact me at telephone numbers 222-4583 or 626-7173 or by email at [neulin@huskers.unl.edu](mailto:neulin@huskers.unl.edu) if you would like additional information about the study or if you have any concerns. My dissertation advisor, Dr. James O'Hanlon, may be also be contacted regarding any complaints or concerns related to this study at telephone number (402) 472-5310 in the U.S.A. or by email at [johanlon1@unl.edu](mailto:johanlon1@unl.edu).

Thank you for consideration. I look forward to a favorable response.

Sincerely,

Neulin Villanueva, Ph.D. Candidate  
Department of Educational Administration  
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

## Appendix B: Letter of Endorsement



## *Ministry of Education & Youth*

*To Educate! To Transform! To Liberate!*

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GEN/21/10(118)

December 16, 2010

Ms. Neulin Villanueva  
Ph.D. Candidate  
University of Nebraska-Lincoln  
P. O. Box 880360  
Lincoln, NE 68588-0360

Dear Ms. Villanueva,

We acknowledge receipt of your letter dated December 14, 2010 regarding your proposal to conduct a study on issues related to quality assurance in the higher education sector of Belize.

The Ministry of Education and Youth believes that this study will make a significant contribution to the store of information required for the effective planning of systems to assure quality outputs in our higher education sector – the sector upon which the imperatives for structured national development rests.

Please be informed that the Ministry of Education and Youth endorses the conduct of this study:

*Assuring Quality in Belizean Higher Education: A Collective Case Study of Institutional*

*Perspectives and Practices* – and supports your request for the cooperation and participation of the Tertiary Institutions of Belize in making meaningful contributions to this study of an important area of our higher education sector.

Sincerely,

**(CHRISTOPHER AIRD, M.Ed.)**  
**Chief Education Officer**

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## Appendix C: Letter of Invitation to Participate

Dear [Name of Prospective Participant]:

My name is Neulin Villanueva and I have been working in higher education in Belize for over seventeen years. I am currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Educational Studies at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and I am seeking your assistance in completing a dissertation study which is part of the requirements for the degree. The study is entitled **Assuring Quality in Belizean Higher Education: A Collective Case Study of Institutional Perspectives and Practices**. The purpose of this research is to explore quality assurance practices and perspectives within Belizean higher education institutions. The research aims to (a) help policy makers and other stakeholders understand how quality assurance is perceived and practiced in the institutions that comprise the higher education system, and (b) help to guide decision-making on the implementation of a viable and effective external quality assurance system for Belize.

I am requesting your personal participation in this study because you fit the description of prospective participants. All prospective participants in this study hold senior leadership positions in one of Belize's local higher education institutions and also represent their institution in ATLIB. (Names and contact information for prospective participants were obtained either from the Association of Tertiary Level Institutions in Belize (ATLIB) or from their institutions when necessary.) I believe that your experience as a higher education leader, your knowledge of institutional policies and practices, and your exposure to system-wide higher education issues through ATLIB make your contribution to the issues being investigated invaluable. I also believe that you will find this study useful for sharing your institution's quality assurance practices, learning about those of other institutions and having the opportunity to contribute your perspectives and ideas to the discourse on quality assurance in Belize.

The study has the support of the Ministry of Education and Youth (see enclosed letter) as well as that of the Association of Tertiary Level Institutions in Belize which passed a motion on October 8, 2010 to endorse the study. I have also obtained the necessary approval from your institution to conduct the study (letter enclosed). The study will include face-to-face interviews with one or more academic administrators at each institution, collection and review of institutional documents related to quality assurance, and an observational tour of pertinent institutional facilities. The data collection and verification phases of the research are scheduled to take place between January and June, 2011 and specific dates will be determined based on your availability.

An **Informed Consent Form** and **Case Study Protocol** are enclosed. The Informed Consent Form includes additional details about procedures, benefits, risks, arrangements for confidentiality and participants' rights. Participation is voluntary and each participant will be required to sign two copies of the Informed Consent Form as an indication of consent to partake in the study. The Case Study Protocol includes definition of terms, the interview protocol and a description of relevant documents to be used in the research.

I encourage you to review the Informed Consent Form and the Case Study Protocol and to contact me at telephone numbers 222-4583 or 626-7173 or by email at [neulin@huskers.unl.edu](mailto:neulin@huskers.unl.edu) if you would like additional information on the study or if you have any concerns. My dissertation advisor, Dr. James O'Hanlon, may be also be contacted regarding any complaints or concerns related to this study at telephone number (402) 472-5310 in the U.S.A. or by email at [johanlon1@unl.edu](mailto:johanlon1@unl.edu).

Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to your participation.

Sincerely,

Neulin Villanueva, Ph.D. Candidate  
Department of Educational Administration  
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

## Appendix D: Informed Consent Form



COLLEGE OF EDUCATION AND HUMAN SCIENCES  
Department of Educational Administration

**Study Title:** Assuring Quality in Belizean Higher Education: A Collective Case Study of Institutional Perspectives and Practices

**Purpose and Research Questions:** The purpose of this collective qualitative case study will be to explore quality assurance practices and perspectives within Belizean higher education institutions. The central question addressed in this research will be “How is quality assurance perceived and practiced within Belize’s higher education institutions?” Sub-questions addressed by the study will be as follows: (a) How is higher education quality conceptualized in Belize’s higher education institutions? (b) How do Belizean institutions currently assure (assess, monitor, improve) quality? (c) How do academic leaders regard the proposed implementation of an external quality assurance system? (d) What implications do these conceptual and contextual issues have for the quality assurance system proposed by the National Accreditation Council Act?

**Procedures:** Data collection and verification will be conducted from January to June, 2011. These processes will take place on-site at participants’ institutions.

- **Description of Participants-** Participants will be persons over the age of nineteen who hold senior academic and administrative posts and who currently have direct responsibility for some aspect of quality assurance at local higher education institutions in Belize. Preference will be given to individuals who also represent their institution in the Association of Tertiary Level Institutions in Belize because of their exposure to system-wide higher education issues. Names and contact information for prospective participants were obtained either from the Association of Tertiary Level Institutions in Belize (ATLIB) or from their institutions when necessary.
- **Methodology and Requirements of Participants-** Data collection and verification of data will be accomplished through two or more site visits to each institution. The number of site visits will depend on the number of participants at each institution and the complexity of the institution’s quality assurance system. Initial site visits will require approximately two hours of each participant’s time. This includes roughly 60 to 75 minutes for a face-to-face interview with the participant and the remaining time for a tour of educational facilities and for sharing institutional documents related to the topic of the research as described in the Case Study Protocol. The interview will focus on participants’ perceptions related to the concept of quality higher education, institutional quality assurance practices and the prospect of introducing an external quality assurance scheme in Belize. Following data collection, each participant will receive a copy of the transcript from his or her individual interview as well as a Site Report. This report is a summary of the investigator’s preliminary findings derived from analysis of the interview(s), documents and observations. Participants will be requested to review the transcript and Site Report and to record any amendments they wish to make as a way of verifying the results of the study. This information will be collected by the investigator at a final site visit to the institution which should take approximately 30 to 45 minutes per participant.
- **Use of Results-** Results of the research will be published as a dissertation study and may be presented in public forums.



**Confidentiality:**

- Names of participants will not be used in the final report or transcribed records of interviews. Data gathered from the interviews will be aggregated to present participants' collective perspectives. Although verbatim quotes may be used in the final report, any information obtained during the study that could identify specific participants will be kept strictly confidential. Participants' comments will be reported anonymously and approval will be sought for edited quotes. All transcriptions will be done by the researcher and audio recordings will be deleted immediately after the data has been verified by participants. Electronic transcriptions will be password-protected, accessible only by the researcher and shared only if necessary for the purposes of auditing the research.
- The focus of the research is to describe quality assurance practices and perspectives system-wide, not by individual institutions; therefore, information on institutions will be reported either anonymously or in aggregate form and will not be associated with the specific institution during the reporting process. Additionally, any sensitive or restricted information about institutions reviewed during the course of the study will be treated as confidential and will not be reported.
- Physical copies of research records will be kept in a locked filing cabinet accessible only by the researcher. Research records may be kept for a period of up to three years after the publication of the study.

**Benefits:** Participants may find this study useful for sharing their institution's quality assurance practices and for learning about those of other institutions. They will also have the opportunity to contribute their perspectives and ideas to the discourse on quality assurance in Belize. The results of the study will be available to both policy-makers and institutional leaders for use in planning and decision-making.

**Risks and/or Discomforts:** There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this study and there will be no compensation for participating. In case of any questions or concerns, the investigator may be reached at telephone numbers 222-4583 or 626-7173 or by email at [neulin@huskers.unl.edu](mailto:neulin@huskers.unl.edu). The dissertation advisor, Dr. James O'Hanlon, may be also be contacted regarding any complaints or concerns related to the study at telephone number (402) 472-5310 in the U.S.A. or by email at [johanlon1@unl.edu](mailto:johanlon1@unl.edu). Additionally, sometimes study participants have questions or concerns about their rights. In that case, you should call the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Institutional Review Board at (402) 472-6965 in the U.S.A. or contact them by email at [irb@unl.edu](mailto:irb@unl.edu).

**Participants' Rights:** Each participant is required to sign this Informed Consent Form as an indication of consent to partake in the study. Participants have the freedom to withdraw at any point in time before or during the study. They also have the right to ask any questions and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in the study and may also refuse to answer any of the questions asked during the interview. Participation in this study is completely voluntary and refusal to participate or withdrawing from the study will not affect participants' relationship with the researcher, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, their specific institution or any entity that endorses the study.

**Informed Consent**

**Name of Participant:** \_\_\_\_\_

I am voluntarily making a decision to participate in this study. My signature certifies that I have decided to participate having read and understood the information presented. I understand that the interview will be audio-taped for the purpose of transcription.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

[Please note that a signed copy of this form is to be provided to the participant.]

## Appendix E: Case Study Protocol

### Assuring Quality in Belizean Higher Education: A Collective Case Study of Institutional Perspectives and Practices

#### CASE STUDY PROTOCOL

##### **A. Background**

Several studies have linked the effectiveness of external quality assurance systems to factors such as concepts of quality, institutional quality assurance practices and leaders' regard for quality initiatives. Consequently, the research seeks to describe how higher education quality is conceptualized in Belize's higher education institutions, how Belizean institutions currently assure quality, and how academic leaders regard the proposed implementation of an external quality assurance system. The research will also examine the implications of these conceptual and contextual issues for the quality assurance system proposed by the Belize National Accreditation Council Act (No. 20 of 2004).

##### **B. Definitions**

The following terms and meanings will be used in the study:

1. **Higher education**- A term used synonymously with tertiary education to refer to educational institutions and programs at the Associate degree level or above.
2. **Quality**- A multidimensional concept that may be defined in various ways in relation to the features or outcomes of a higher education institution, program or activity. Definitions may include, but are not limited to, ideas such as
  - a. the degree to which a program or institution is exceptional (excellent or exclusive)
  - b. the degree to which a program or institution conforms to specific standards
  - c. the level of fitness of a program or institution for its particular purpose
  - d. the degree to which the program or institution achieves value for money (efficiency)
  - e. the degree to which students are positively transformed by the program or institution
3. **Quality assurance**- refers to a continuous process of evaluating (assessing, monitoring, guaranteeing, maintaining, and improving) the quality of a higher education system, institutions or programs.
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.
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.

[Note: Definition 2 is based on research by Harvey & Green (1993) and definitions 3, 4, and 5 are derived from the International Institute for Educational Planning's document entitled *External quality assurance: Options for higher education managers* (2007, pp.16-17).]

##### **C. Interview Protocol**

The following questions and topics will guide the interview:

1. What are your current roles and responsibilities?
2. Tell me about your institution? (*What is its mission, purpose, goals?*)
3. There are many ways to define quality. How do you believe your institution defines quality? (*Is it exceptionality, conformance to standards, fitness for purpose, value for money, transformation of students or some other definition?*)

4. How does your institution develop and review courses and programs?  
(*What process, instruments, standards or data are used? Who within the institution or external to the institution are involved?*)
5. How does your institution evaluate faculty and support professional development? (*What process, instruments, standards or data are used? Who within the institution or external to the institution are involved?*)
6. How does your institution assess and support student learning?  
(*What process, instruments, standards or data are used? Who within the institution or external to the institution are involved?*)
7. What constraints do you encounter in trying to assure quality? (*Temporal, spatial, historical, political, economic, cultural, social, personal?*)
8. How important do you believe it is for Belize to establish an external quality assurance system? (*Is it relevant? Do you believe that there are better alternatives?*)
9. If a system were to be put in place, what do you think the purpose/emphasis should be?  
(*Accountability, quality control, quality improvement, some other purpose?*)
10. If an external quality assurance system were to be put in place, what are your hopes for how such a system would be administered? (*Who should be responsible for the system? Should participation be compulsory or voluntary and for which type of institutions? Should results be tied to public funding or not?*)
11. If an external quality assurance system were to be put in place, what are your hopes for how such a system would function? (*Who should conduct evaluations? What should they evaluate? How should standards/objectives be determined?*)
12. What challenges do you foresee in trying to implement an external quality assurance system in Belize? (*Temporal, spatial, historical, political, economic, cultural, social, personal?*)

#### **D. Documentation**

Documents are an important part of this research study. They can help the investigator to understand policies and processes which are not observed and also supplement and verify information obtained from interviews. It is understood that there may be practices and policies which your institution has not yet documented; however, where available, the following documents would be very useful to the research:

1. documents that describe the mission, purpose, or goals of the institution
2. documents that describe how the institution conceptualizes quality (by exceptionality, conformance to standards, fitness for purpose, value for money, transformation of students or some other definition)
3. documents that describe how the institution develops and reviews courses and programs
4. documents that describe how the institution evaluates faculty and supports professional development
5. documents that describe how the institution assesses and supports student learning

Please make available either electronic or hard copies of the above documents for collection by the investigator at the time of the site visit. (Note: Only non-confidential documents are being requested.)

#### **E. Observation**

Seeing areas where institutional activities such as teaching, learning and student support take place may be important in understanding issues and processes discussed during the interview or described in documents. Therefore, kindly arrange for a tour of your educational facilities during the site visit.

-END-

## Appendix F: Revised Interview Protocol

1. Tell me a little about yourself. *(What are your current roles and responsibilities at your institution? How long have you been involved in higher education in Belize? in ATLIB?)*
2. Tell me about your institution. *(What is its mission? What are you hoping to achieve as an institution?)*
3. There are many ways to define higher education quality. What definition do you believe predominates at your institution? *(Is it exceptionalism, conformance to standards, fitness for purpose, value for money, transformation of students or some other definition?)*
4. How is your institution structured to carry out its functions? *(What offices, departments or committees do you have in place? How are academic activities coordinated?)*
5. What process do you use to develop and review curriculum? *(Who is normally involved? Do you have written policies to guide the process? What kinds of information if any do you collect?)*
6. How does your institution evaluate faculty? *(What process is used to evaluate faculty? What instruments do you use? Is there a professional development program in place? What are the areas or topics of recent interest? )*
7. How does your institution ensure that students are learning? *(What types of assessments are done? Is there a systematic way of gathering feedback from graduates or employers? Are there mechanisms in place to assess student learning at the end of a program? )*
8. What constraints do you encounter in trying to assure quality?
9. Do you believe that Belize should establish an external quality assurance system? *(Is it important, relevant?)*
10. If a system were to be put in place, what do you think the purpose or emphasis should be? *(Should it be accountability-public assurance, quality control-minimum standards, quality improvement, or some other purpose?)*
11. If an external quality assurance system were to be put in place, what are your hopes for how such a system would be administered?
  - a. *Who should be responsible for the system? Should it be government, the institutions or professional bodies? Should we go for a local or regional system?*
  - b. *Should participation be compulsory or voluntary?*
  - c. *Should results be tied to public funding or not?*
12. What challenges do you foresee in trying to implement an external quality assurance system in Belize?

## Appendix G: Document List

<b>Source</b>	<b>Item</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Site #1</b>	Catalog	Handbook with general information (history and mission) on the institution, program descriptions, academic rules and regulations, policies on conduct, financial information, academic calendar, course descriptions, and listing of faculty and staff ; 38 pages
	Faculty Guidelines	Guidelines on work-related expectations for faculty members; 2 pages
	Test Evaluation Instrument	Instrument used in evaluating tests; 1 page
	Course/Instructor Evaluation	Instrument used in student evaluation of course and instructor, consists of 22 items relating to course, instruction, and instructor ; 1 page
	Summary Teacher Evaluation	Instruments used in annual appraisal of teachers, summarizes student evaluation results and rates overall performance; 2 pages
<b>Site #2</b>	Catalog	Handbook containing general information (history, mission and vision) about the institution, administrative structure, description of student services, admissions policies, academic policies, student policies, program sequences, course descriptions and academic calendar; 185 pages
	Course Syllabus of Record	Institutional guidelines for constructing syllabi; 36 pages
	Quality Assurance Philosophy	Description of mission, vision and values of the institution's quality assurance office; 1 page
	Strategic Plans	Outline of long term and short term strategic plans for the institution, describes mission, vision, values, and strategic directions; 18 pages
	Academic Policies	Handbook detailing admissions and academic policies; 26 pages
	General Education Manual	Manual explaining general education requirements for various types of degrees; 36 pages
	Program Review Manual	Manual describing the institution's program review policy and outlining the stages of the program review process, appendices containing various forms and guidelines used in the process; 66 pages
	Program Specifications Manual	Manual which provides guidelines for the development of programs (aims, intended learning outcomes, course sequence, teaching strategies, methodologies and assessment, and quality standards); 21 pages
	Course Outline Manual	Institutional guidelines for constructing course

		outlines; 38 pages
	Faculty Performance Evaluation Instrument	Instrument used in end-of-year evaluation of faculty, includes description of procedures and criteria for evaluation; 12 pages
	Faculty Evaluation Form	Instrument used by administrators in observation of faculty; 2 pages
	Increment Approval Form	Instrument used by administrators to recommend or deny salary increment; 1 page
	Student Evaluation of Instruction Guidelines	Document describing the purpose, use and procedures for student evaluation of instruction; 5 pages
	Professional Development Workshop Registration Form	Form used by the institution to have faculty select and register for professional development workshops; 2 pages
	Common Exams Report	A form used to report the process used in development of common exams; 1 page
<b>Site #3</b>	Catalog	Handbook containing general information (mission, organizational structure, institutional learning outcomes) about the institution, admission and academic policies, financial information, degree requirements, course descriptions, and listing of administration, faculty, and staff; 324 pages
	Faculty Handbook	Handbook containing information on the mission, philosophy, and history of the institution, administration and governance, personnel policies and operating guidelines, appendices with various forms and guidelines; 218 pages
	Student Handbook	Handbook containing general information about the institution, description of organizational structure and administration, general policies and procedures, description of facilities and resources, and information on student services, organizations, and resources; 48 pages
	Course Proposal Form	Instrument used for the application and approval of new courses; 7 pages
	Degree/ Program Review Framework	Guidelines for reviewing academic programs; 8 pages
	Observation Forms	Instruments used in classroom observations; 4 pages
	Student Evaluation of Supervisor	Instrument used by students for evaluation of supervisors in the teacher education program; 2 pages
	Course Feedback Form	Instrument used to solicit feedback from instructors regarding courses taught; 1 page
<b>Site #4</b>	Student Handbook	Handbook with information on the mission of the institution, academic calendar, financial

		information, academic policies, student policies, admission and remedial policies, description of general core and program sequences, listing of administration, faculty and staff; 127 pages
	Faculty and Course Evaluation Form	Instrument used by students to evaluate lecturers and courses; 1 page
	Faculty Semester Plan	Faculty self-evaluation instrument, collects information on courses taught and academic and service responsibilities; 3 pages
<b>Site #5</b>	Catalog	Handbook containing general information (history, mission) of the institution, admission policies, academic policies and procedures, financial information, descriptions of programs of studies, course description, academic calendar and listing of administration, faculty and staff; 60 pages
	Faculty Handbook	Handbook detailing the philosophy of the institution, professional expectations, terms and conditions of employment, guidelines and procedures, faculty evaluation criteria, appendices with a variety of forms and guidelines including faculty evaluation instruments; 67 pages
	Student Handbook	Handbook containing information on student services, programs and policies and student government bye-laws; 59 pages
<b>Site #6</b>	Catalog	Handbook containing general information (history, mission) about the institution, admissions procedures and requirements, academic policies and procedures, financial information, program sequences, course descriptions and listing of administration, faculty and staff; 43 pages
	Teacher's Handbook	Handbook outlining philosophy, objectives and purpose of the institution, expectations of teachers, operational guidelines and various forms; 19 pages
	Student Handbook	Handbook containing general information about the institution, calendar of activities, description of degree programs, student policies, academic policies and procedures, student organization and financial information; 38 pages
	Evaluation Form	Instrument used by students to evaluate instructors; 1 page
<b>Site #7</b>	Catalog	Handbook with information on history, philosophy, and mission of the institution, organizational structure, academic calendar,

		financial information, admission and academic policies, description of support services, program outlines, course descriptions and listing of members of management, administration, faculty, and staff; 24 pages
<b>Site #8</b>	Catalog	Handbook containing general information (history and mission) about the institution, admissions procedures, financial information, academic policies and procedures, guidelines on conduct, description of student services, programs of study, course descriptions, listing of members of administration, faculty, and staff, and academic calendar; 54 pages
	Faculty and Staff Handbook	Handbook containing general information on the history, mission and purpose of the institution, administrative structure and duties, regulations governing conditions of employment, general policies, code of ethics, benefits and an appendices section with various forms such as employment contracts, leave forms and teacher evaluation and appraisal forms; 47 pages
<b>Site #9</b>	Catalog	Handbook containing general information (history and mission) about the institution, academic calendar, admissions procedures, financial information, academic policies and procedures, a description of student services, programs of study, course descriptions, listing of members of management, administration, faculty and staff and a copy of the student evaluation of instructor form; 54 pages
<b>Site #10</b>	Mission Statement	Website page with mission statement
	Composition of Board	Website page with list of board members
	Academic Offerings	Website page with program outlines



## Appendix H: Analytic Categories and Codes

Research Questions (RQ)	Categories/ Codes
RQ #1: How is quality conceptualized in Belizean higher education institutions?	<p><b>Definitions of Quality</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. exceptionality</li> <li>2. perfection or consistency</li> <li>3. fitness for purpose</li> <li>4. value for money</li> <li>5. transformation</li> </ol> <p>(Harvey &amp; Green, 1993a)</p>
RQ #2: How do Belizean institutions currently assure (monitor, maintain and improve) quality?	<p><b>Academic Learning Organization Characteristics</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Culture of evidence in problem solving</li> <li>2. Coordination of teaching units</li> <li>3. Learning from others</li> <li>4. University-wide coordination of learning</li> <li>5. Transferring knowledge</li> </ol> <p>(Dill, 1999)</p>
RQ #3: How do academic leaders regard the proposed implementation of an external quality assurance system?	<p><b>Major Organizational Choices in External Quality Assurance Systems</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Purposes</li> <li>2. Affiliation</li> <li>3. General Approaches</li> <li>4. Links to Public Funding</li> </ol> <p>(IIEP, 2007)</p>
RQ#4: What implications do these conceptual and contextual issues have for the quality assurance system proposed by the National Accreditation Council of Belize Act?	<p><b>Contextual Factors in Choosing the Right Model of Quality Assessment</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Purposes of Assessment</li> <li>2. Level of Authority</li> <li>3. Level of Resources</li> <li>4. Centralization of Operations</li> <li>5. System Heterogeneity</li> <li>6. Provider Complexity</li> </ol> <p>(Gates et al., 2002)</p>

## Appendix I: Data Analysis Framework

### A. Within-case Analysis and Direct Interpretation

#### Part I. Quality Concepts and Contextual Issues

RQ #1: How is higher education quality conceptualized in Belize's higher education institutions?

1. What do interviews, documentation and observations say about the history, mission, goals of the institution?
2. What do interviews, documentation and observations say about the purpose of higher education?
3. What concepts of quality are evident from interviews, documentation and observations?
4. How do the characteristics described by academic leaders compare with the documentation and researcher's observations?

#### Part II. Internal Quality Assurance Structures, Practices and Contextual Issues

RQ #2: How do Belizean institutions currently assure (assess, monitor, improve) quality?

1. What structures, policies and guidelines for reviewing existing programs and developing new ones are evident from interviews, documentation and observations?
2. What structures, policies and guidelines for faculty evaluation and development are evident from interviews, documentation and observations?
3. What structures, policies and guidelines for assessing and supporting student learning are evident from interviews, documentation and observations?
4. What constraints to assuring quality are evident from the interviews, documentation and observations?

#### Part III. Perspectives on External Quality Assurance and Contextual Issues

RQ #3: How do academic leaders regard the proposed implementation of an external quality assurance system?

1. What level of importance do academic leaders give to the establishment of an external quality assurance system?
2. What do academic leaders believe the purpose of an external quality assurance system should be?
3. What are the views of academic leaders on how external quality assurance should be funded, the level of control over institutions, and how assessment results should be used?
4. What challenges to implementing an external quality assurance system in Belize do academic leaders foresee?
5. What are academic leaders hoping for in terms of quality assurance in Belize?

## B. Cross-case Analysis and Aggregation of Data

### Identifying Themes and Patterns:

1. Concepts
  - a. What concepts of quality are evident from each case?
  - b. What are the similarities and differences among cases?
  - c. Are there any noticeable patterns between institution types?
  
2. Internal Quality Assurance
  - a. What structures and practices are evident from each case?
  - b. What are the similarities and differences among cases?
  - c. Are there any noticeable patterns among institution types?
  
3. External Quality Assurance
  - a. What views on external quality assurance are evident from each case?
  - b. What are the similarities and differences among cases?
  - c. Are there any noticeable patterns among institution types?
  
4. Contextual Issues
  - a. What constraints to quality assurance are evident from each case?
  - b. What are the similarities and differences among cases?
  - c. Are there any noticeable patterns among institution types?

## C. Synthesis

### Application to Theory and Theory Generation:

1. How do the concepts, structures, practices and context in the findings relate to theory found in the literature?
2. How do the concepts, structures, practices and context in the findings relate to the National Accreditation Council Act?
3. Based on the findings and analysis, what recommendations can be made to policy makers and stakeholders regarding the National Accreditation Council Act?
4. Based on the findings and analysis, what recommendations can be made to policy makers and stakeholders regarding further development of a quality assurance system for Belize?

## Appendix J: Case Studies in Curriculum Development and Review

### Case Study #1

“There was nothing officially in place, so we adopted our own self-study format....It is only since October last year that a proposal for a policy review framework has been circulated and that is what we’re now implementing.” (T#4:LINE189)

“The first part of it deals with collecting enrollment data, so right now we’re in Phase One according to this document, tracking enrollment, part-time, full-time, the number of teachers, qualifications, that kind of thing. That’s what we’re looking at....we’ve actually gone beyond to Phase Two, looking at program purpose and that’s where ...the bulk of the work is coming in.” (T#4:LINE209)

“It might sound strange, but we are developing syllabuses where they don’t exist. We have course outlines, but course outlines aren’t syllabi.... for the most part, I think in Business and General Studies, you have very few syllabuses around, so we’re looking at those and trying to fill that gap.” (T#4:LINE316)

“We have not been able to clearly articulate very definitively what the general core is supposed to do. We’ve had some discussion, some research, some documentation, but no consensus, hence the work of this committee. I think once that’s clearly articulated then you can go about looking at whether the general core is doing what it’s supposed to do. So we haven’t even done that part yet, but we’re on our way.” (T#4:LINE324)

“We don’t want to frustrate anybody, but if you’re adding a new course, it has to hold up to the academic rigor, the review. What’s the purpose of it? Where does it fit? Does it meet the competencies for general core? Can it be considered as an option for a general core course? What do you need in terms of additional material, resources, space? Does it have a prerequisite? The whole list of questions are there to be answered with a supporting syllabus and course outline and I suspect it might be a little intimidating, but I am glad that it is in place so that when a new program is coming up, new courses are being introduced, it is developed and it is of good quality, and that you take assessment into consideration.” (T#4:LINE466)

### Case Study #2

“We have a manual for program development. The program development manual outlines the stages which you must follow while developing a program. In the past we probably have not clearly followed all the stages outlined in a sequence. For example... we had an Associate program for a while....We wanted to upgrade because there was a demand and eventually a group of faculty members came together, they looked at the core courses, they put it together, and they sent in a proposal...” (T#2:LINE128)

“The first phase is really to do the concept paper and to generate some discussion to see whether this concept is viable before time is invested into developing a proposal. Once that concept paper is discussed, we might point out some broad things; you know, we

might what to look at the funding, you might want to look at sustainability, you might want to look at where you're going to get your lecturers, what are the future projections, and one of the new things that we're including now is saying, if you're going to propose an Associate's degree program, have your framework for your Bachelor's degree or articulation where that person will be going for further studies. If you're going to propose a Bachelor's degree program, start to plan on your Master's degree program. Perhaps you might want to look at graduate certificate program or perhaps you might want to look long term at your Master's degree program and then move, start the thinking, initiate the thinking in that fashion. So the manual has been developed and that has its components that we follow to allow us to systematically do that." (T#3:LINE337)

"We currently have fifty-three programs and we have fifty-three program specifications documents. So we've gone through that first phase. As in any first phase what happens is that the quality of the output varies."(T#13:LINE384)

"The program specifications document is a good tool to enable us to articulate, in a given format, what we want our graduates to exit with—what knowledge, what skills and competencies and what values and attitudes....And when those statements are constructed they have to be deliberately tied, deliberate. So when you construct your program mission it has to tie in to your Faculty and departmental mission, which in turn already ties in with the institution's mission." (T#13:LINE420)

"We tend to, from the onset, start with our vision, our mission for each program, and then we look at a description of what we want the graduate from that program to be like. Based on that we develop our curriculum; so we develop the courses that would lead to developing those qualities and then we develop course syllabi that would develop those qualities that we want the graduate to finish with. That is the institution's ideal way of looking at the development of curriculum. It's starting from a program specification, so for each of our programs, we have a specification." (T#14:LINE209)

"We are reviewing the program specifications for all the programs right now and that gives us an idea of whether or not our syllabi and our course outlines are aligned with our specifications." (T#14:LINE248)

"We had a very active Quality Assurance Office at the time; we still do now, with high requirements. I remember there were several edits to a point of frustration on behalf of the team who were developing the new program, but the QA Office now has a new program development guide which would make one's life easier, though still very frustrating and extremely detailed, but then it's important to be detailed for accreditation purposes and to make sure all the 'T's are crossed and all the 'I's are dotted. We are in the middle of putting together a program and so we're following that manual very closely to make sure we get it the way it should be done." (T#16:LINE221)

"With the Management program we are at the point where we are administering the surveys so that point will come when we will have our say in regard to the Business Administration program." (T#16:LINE198)

"The Bachelor's in Nursing program is going through the review process. They already had the peer review which resulted in a self-study assessment and now, this week, it is going through the external review, which involves bringing in people outside of our institution to take a look at everything including the self-study report and to make some

recommendations for enhancing, filling gaps, identifying weaknesses, et cetera....Following the review, there is then the quality enhancement plan and its implementation. So those are the steps that follow.” (T#17:LINE168)

## Appendix K: Case Studies in Faculty Evaluation and Professional Development

### Case Study #3

“When the person is employed we cannot assume that they will always use the best practices in the classroom.” (T#7:LINE126)

“When a teacher gets employed here the teacher knows exactly what the philosophy or values are of the school, how we define professionalism, ethics, integrity, the terms and conditions of employment, guidelines, policies, norms and procedures that have to do with the instruction.” (T#7:LINE417)

“We have a clinical supervision exercise, in which the faculty, especially in the beginning years, is told clearly to look at the administration as mentors, not because we have all the answers, but over time, we do develop some kind of knowledge on best practices in the classroom. A new teacher at the institution can expect to be called in for a clinical supervision exercise where he or she is asked to point out something that they might need help on, what is called a planning conference. Then there is an actual classroom observation that has a specific objective and then feedback and future actions.” (T#7:LINE177)

“If we believe that there is indeed an area strong enough but not warranting release, we will point that out and we will tell the lecturer [that] we will have to repeat this exercise....you can’t have a standard formula for that. It’s the formative approach. (T#7:LINE195)

“The other exercise that we practice is the announced classroom observation and the unannounced and when we go into the classroom for just general observations there is an instrument that we use....We’re looking pretty much at classroom management.... lesson delivery.... teacher skills and behaviors, those are three of the things that we look at in that kind of evaluation. We still consider it formative but in this kind of observation we can also begin to see any tell-tale signs of an area that requires [attention].” (T#7:LINE201)

“Another instrument is the general instructor evaluation.... It is made clear to the teacher that he or she has five roles to play. One is the instructor’s duties. Yes, you’re here to teach and under that there are about ten subsections on how you use the curriculum, how you display adequate knowledge of the subject area, and that kind of thing. The other role is the professional teacher duties that brings the whole thing about ethical standards, how you maintain student confidentiality, how you participate in professional organizations, the professionalism part, even how you carry yourself as a person, very important.... The third role is program manager duties. In other words, yes, you’re going to teach but you also need to know how to maintain appropriate student records.... The whole issue of submitting required reports on time, how well they use resources in the school, that’s all program manager duties. The fourth role is faculty member duties. How well you work with other colleagues.” (T#7:LINE218)

“Towards the end of the semester the students are asked to evaluate them [the faculty] and the students, whilst there are 14 specific questions that they must respond to, there’s also an open area for suggested ways on how to improve and [a] comments section both for the good things and the not so good things....This part of the evaluation is not factored into any final figure for the teacher because this can be very subjective. We review it and then we try to have the teacher read it as soon as possible and then we keep one set for maybe one semester and then we let them have it.” (T#7:LINE253)

“There’s one evaluation that is the one that is filled out for... increment purposes and it’s a general evaluation form of nine questions that pretty much looks at nine aspects of the teaching profession which would be productivity, job attitude, quality of work, dependability, initiative, public relations and cooperation, punctuality, reliability under pressure and job knowledge. The instrument in itself requires review, but it is working so far for us....Before signing on to anything, the faculty member has input. There are years when I fill it out and give it to them and if they have a question, before we sign we clarify that, or sometimes I ask them to grade themselves first and then I match it with my marks and then we have a discussion, but there’s no mystery, no mystery about evaluation.” (T#7:LINE280)

“You cannot run a school from behind a desk, you have to walk around. We pick up certain things. We’re open with the faculty member and when there’re issues that everybody can benefit from, that becomes the theme for the professional development that we hold in August. Also, as the year goes, if we notice that we can bring in a guest speaker on some issue, we bring that and we plug it in as part of a general meeting.” (T#7:LINE318)

#### **Case Study #4**

“The two most important evaluations are the student and the administration. At the end of each course, there is an evaluation form that students complete. That’s formal, they write on the form and they give them a grade on a scale of 1 to 5. We tally that. Although they’re writing numbers, at the end we ask for general comments.” (T#10:LINE506)

“We also have admin evaluation. We do two things. We do the class visits where we inform teachers that, ‘We’ll be visiting this week, for this period. We’ll be getting into everybody’s class. We will sit down and we will watch you teach.’ We have been doing this twice per year, once each semester, as long as time allows....The second one is what we call the personal interview. At the end of the semester we will sit with each teacher and have a personal interview. We have an instrument. It’s divided into sections; part of it is personal, part of it is academic [and] part of it is professional development. The first time we did it we had ‘Congratulations’ which means you’re doing very good or ‘NI’, needs to improve. Indirectly what we do every year, we just count your NI and your C and we believe that if somebody has more ‘congratulations’ than ‘need to improve’ we could work with you, but what we try to do is create an instrument that was better than that increment form that the Ministry sends around....Part of it asks your involvement in other activities. Part of the philosophy we preach is that we want you to teach, we want you to do service, and we want you to do research.” (T#10:LINE521)

“We have a suggestion box for those people who will give you messages but they do not

want to give you their name.” (T#10:LINE576)

“It is common practice for the dean or the assistant dean to step into your class. That’s not a written evaluation. It could be that I pass your class and you are saying something that interests me, so I just stand to the back and listen. The students are accustomed to it... We stop by, listen, check; those informal things also help.” (T#10:LINE861)

“If there are changes with the external syllabus or syllabuses, we will send our teachers to the workshop; that’s another part of professional development. For example, there was a workshop in Belize City on Friday for Environmental Science, so my teacher was there. She is suppose to come back now and say whether or not there are any changes that I must make for next year and so that’s part of their professional development.” (T#10:LINE791)

“Some of our teachers, about seven of them, travel to the Caribbean. Although it is to check CXC CAPE papers, it is also sometimes to attend workshops... they come back rejuvenated with new ideas. We use that also to obtain new resource books, tapes, whatever exists, and so it means that Environmental Science, Math, Spanish, Computer Science, English, those subjects that the teachers leave for every year, we ask them to look for the latest syllabus that exists, the latest book that exists, and we guarantee that we will buy it.” (T#10:LINE679)

“When ATLIB have these Café workshops for faculty and staff professional development, we will send our people there. If COBEC comes in we will also send our people there. We do our own in-house workshops with administration. We also, for example this year, did a plan where we are calling in different people, so we’re looking at six or so people over a span of time.” (T#10:LINE687)

### **Case Study #5**

“There’re four different assessments that we carry out with both full-time and adjuncts. The first is what we refer to as the focus group evaluation sessions. This happens at week four of the semester. The Chair and I would go into one class per faculty member and get a random sample of, on average, six to eight students and we have some set questions that we ask them and seek their reaction, in confidentiality and then as soon as we’re finished with that we call the faculty member in to discuss the results. Then there’s the classroom observation. We have two of those, one announced and the second unannounced where again, two persons, this time one has to be the Dean and the other a senior faculty or I could designate the Chair, go into a class, one per faculty again. We try to do a different class than the one we do for the focus group and then we sit in the back of the room, sometimes not for the entire lecture time but to see how the faculty member starts, if there’s continuity in the lecture, and participation from the students, some basic things that we point out; so we do that visit, announced and unannounced. The fourth is the student evaluation which takes place the last two weeks or three weeks before the semester is up, where all the students fill out the evaluation questionnaire. Those are the four ways in which we evaluate faculty. If I have a problem faculty and I continue to get concerns, I personally go in again and sit in and try to solve the problem. It’s important for me that students get what they’re paying for when they come here.” (T#16:LINE253)

“We have a comprehensive performance objectives and annual performance evaluation system where at the start of a semester I personally meet with every faculty member,



along with the Chair and there's a comprehensive form that they fill out before they come to see me to let me know what they will do this year, for example, what professional development they would like to do and then we update that information in January....If we believe it is not enough, then we will inform them that maybe they could do some more, because we offer some here. We hold them responsible for professional development outside of the institution as well, because as professionals in their field, they must know what else is happening out there, and if they would like to and there're cost implications, they can let us know and we try to pay for it because we encourage faculty members to seek out their own professional development also." (T#16:LINE285)

"We provide an online facility where students can anonymously comment on any aspect of instruction at any time during the semester. That comment automatically comes here. I then channel it to the relevant dean.... The proposal now is to do it through our Intranet. We will know it is a student because there will be a password or a code for them to get into the Intranet." (T#13:LINE750)

"We have the appraisal that looks at teaching, teaching related service, academic service, professional service and research. So we do have those templates; we do have those systems in and it's about enforcing them and not just enforcing but doing it consistently across the institution, getting to those places. These are the elements of quality that we need to look at. How do I interpret what I'm doing versus somebody else, another faculty? But we have that and that is linked to performance objectives that faculty members are supposed to assign themselves at the start of the year. This is a weak process." (T#17:LINE206)

"We have a menu of [faculty development] offerings that are announced and the menu is made based on a survey that is done the previous year. Right now we are preparing to do the survey for 11-12 to make sure that people can input as to what they want to see on the menu. The requirement is that each full-time person has to take at least one per semester out of the menu. We do make exceptions where a faculty offers an additional workshop on professional development. If they offer and take the workshop that's fine the requirement is at least one, but I'm now finding that people are taking two and even three. They're going beyond the minimum required." (T#13:LINE206)

"In the summer all faculty go off for vacation in the month after the semester closes; they wrap up, get exams in, et cetera, and we have about two weeks before they leave.... We are going to use the bulk of that time to offer a number of professional development activities. Some of it will be for everybody and others will be for specific departments or specific interests, people who may not have interest in the other areas." (T#17:LINE237)

### **Case Study #6**

"Well, first of all, you have to hope and pray after you've done your due diligence at the time of interviewing that you've hired the right person, but you can't just leave it to chance. You have to check." (T#4:LINE246)

"We get feedback from students at the half-way point in the term [and] at the end of the term. Students from time to time would send a note or send an email to say, 'Miss can you take a look at so and so?' (T#4:LINE248)

“The academic chairperson also participates in the evaluation of the teacher, at least once per term if the person is new, or once a year. The Assistant Dean...does his rounds every day and from time to time will stop in for 15, 20 minutes randomly and get information there.” (T#4:LINE264)

“Then there is the formal visit where we would ask the teacher to complete a pre-observation form and then I would go in and formally observe and record whatever is going on, then have the post-observation conference.” (T#4:LINE267)

“We take all that information along with other records—attendance, punctuality and general involvement in the life of the school, that kind of thing—for the final appraisal.” (T#4:LINE269)

“We try to identify the challenges fairly early so that you can have the intervention and look to see if there is the implementation of the recommendations and track their development.” (T#4:LINE295)

“Every term we organize at least a few days or a week...whether full-time or part-time, looking at different topics that we think would be helpful—principles of adult education, how to motivate students to achieve, you know, different things. We normally have a week or so in August and we have two days before the start of the January term where we use it for that.” (T#4:LINE302)

“There are workshops organized for particular people if we perceive a need in an area.” (T#4:LINE281)