

# Interview

## In Pursuit of Quality: Professor Elsa Leo-Rhynie Reflects

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CAROLINE DYCHE

*The term 'quality' is one which features so widely in the nomenclature of structures and bodies of The University of the West Indies that it risks going unnoticed; however, the term and its recurrence are more than worthy of attention, being the result of a coordinated plan begun in the mid-1990s to enhance the institution on various fronts. With this QEF journal emanating from the UWI's foray into what has been called the 'quality assurance movement', and approaching the twentieth anniversary since it was first published in 1999 as the YouWeQ magazine, we sought the insights of a pioneer UWI 'quality' player, Professor Elsa Leo-Rhynie (E.L-R), on the journal's raison d'être and the wider context within which it came into being.*

*Professor Leo-Rhynie, a recipient of the Jamaica national honour, Commander of Distinction, was the first woman to be Principal of a UWI campus and the first woman to have served as both Deputy Principal and Principal.*

### Birth of Journal and Quality Assurance Thrust

CD: So I wanted to start with the journal itself, which is the reason that you are here. I have always associated you with the beginning of the journal, but when we spoke before this, you said you weren't actually the person who started it.

E.L-R: No, definitely not.

CD: So what are your recollections of the birth of the journal?

EL-R: Well, I know that Professor Hilary Beckles<sup>1</sup> became Pro Vice-Chancellor (PVC) in charge of the Board for Undergraduate Studies in 1998 or 99. I am not sure which one. But he took over from Professor Marlene Hamilton. Now Professor Hamilton had been the first PVC and Chair of the Board for Undergraduate Studies (BUS), and her main remit was to introduce the quality assurance emphasis within the institution. Before that, the only quality assurance initiatives we had were practices such as first and second markers, moderation of scripts and external examinations. We didn't have any sort of review of curricula. I mean, Faculties did their own thing, but there was no overall review.

CD: So it was not centralised at all?

E.L-R: Not at all. So when the 1994 report from the new Chancellor came out, the introduction of quality assurance (QA) measures within the institution was recommended, and this was in keeping with what was like an international wave within the academic community.

CD: For quality assurance?

E.L-R: Yes. In the 1990s, a Quality Assurance Agency had been set up in the United Kingdom, and universities worldwide were engaging in discussions about quality assurance and accreditation. So Professor Hamilton's remit, as PVC of BUS, was to introduce quality assurance to UWI. She worked with the late Peter Whitely, and Anthony Perry to a lesser extent. They were responsible for bringing the message and the practice of quality assurance to the entire University.

CD: Ok. So it was regional.

E.L-R: Right, because she was the Pro Vice-Chancellor, which is at the regional level. It was a matter of taking it across to all three campuses . . . and setting up mechanisms for doing quality assurance. 'How do we do it?' 'What did it involve?' That was really the genesis, and she and her team developed the foundations of the system which was established and which remains in place . . . When Professor Nettleford

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1. Now UWI Vice-Chancellor Professor Sir Hilary Beckles.

became Vice-Chancellor in 1998/1999, Professor Hamilton was asked to take over a different portfolio as Pro Vice-Chancellor, and Professor Beckles was made Pro Vice-Chancellor and Chair of the Board for Undergraduate Studies. When he assumed office, a lot of the preliminary QA work had been done, and he felt that these – this is my recollection – that **these gains should be recorded somehow and shared**. And also that a magazine – because it was a magazine at the time – to just document what were some of the quality considerations should be available for the University itself. The name of the magazine ‘*YouWeQ*’, you know, was to indicate that it’s not something that’s imposed; it’s something that ‘We’ are all working towards, but it was also a play on how we refer to “UWI” and “Q” for the quality assurance forum, and as you see, the first one was in 1999 [*points to issue*].

CD: The mechanisms that were set up? Because you mentioned the accreditation and the quality assurance reviews. Now, when I think of accreditation, I think of UWI Hospital, but would this then be when we [the University] started . . . ?

E.L-R: No. At the time when UWI established its internal quality assurance system, we were not considering accreditation. Accreditation was a major issue that was being discussed in the education arena internationally, in Europe, for example. Concerns included comparison of quality among universities, and this led to an agreement in Bologna. I am not remembering everything, but there was concern. But we were not interested in accreditation at the time because we had a Royal Charter, and the Royal Charter was like that of the universities in the United Kingdom where they were given the responsibility to offer and monitor their own degrees, to set their own quality level. Also, remember that we started out as a College of London University, so London University sort of set the tone, and we were expected to maintain that standard. The external examination system and the moderation system were very strong, and so we had a mechanism internally to assure some form of quality. So we were not really initially interested in accreditation, and in fact accreditation came far down the line.

CD: So the kind of framework that was there . . . you had the Board for Undergraduate Studies, and you would have had a Quality Assurance Unit within the Board?

E.L-R: Right. Remember that the Board for Undergraduate Studies (BUS) came into being in 1994 because it was a recommendation from the Chancellor's Report on Governance. Professor Hamilton was the inaugural (BUS) Pro Vice-Chancellor, and her main remit was quality assurance. **So the magazine was really a mechanism for informing the university community about quality and quality assurance, but also allowing them to understand how they would have to be involved in it.** And it was Professor Beckles's initiative that set it up, as a magazine at first.

CD: So it was informing as well as promoting the whole issue of quality.

E.L-R: Of quality, right.

CD: Because I have always wondered . . . when I look at the articles that are submitted. Oftentimes they are coming from people whose remit really seems to be the whole 'business' of quality. . . people who are pushing with best practices. And they are coming from what context? You have a BUS office for the region, right?

E.L-R: There is a regional office, but each campus has a quality assurance unit.

CD:O kay, and so that was introduced with this whole push towards quality assurance?

E.L-R: Yes.

CD: Alright. So Professor Hamilton started it [the quality assurance thrust] and Professor Beckles took it on and he-

E.L-R: He introduced the magazine, yes.

CD: And how did you foresee . . .?

E.L-R: When I came on as PVC in 2002, I felt that the magazine *YouWEQ* was a very powerful tool, or could be developed into a very powerful tool. But I thought that in an academic setting, we needed to make it a proper academic journal. The first thing we did was to make it more

journal-like, and so the first issue under my watch was this one [*holds up issue*] where we changed the shape . . . But we continued with the same sort of magazine-type content. We did not have refereed articles, but we made it more journal-like. In 2002, the Strategic Plan (2002–2007) was coming on stream, and so we felt that it would be good to look at the Strategic Plan in terms of ‘How does it address quality?’ because a large portion of the Strategic Plan was involved with quality. So we focused on that, quality as a specific objective. We also decided not to publish three times a year, as the magazine had been, but to limit publication to once a year so that we could spend the year getting a more academic quality of article . . . leading up to trying to have a refereed journal. So the first two [issues] consisted mainly of articles solicited from academics who were knowledgeable about the QA process.

CD: Okay. So can you recall what were some of the challenges you faced with the journal?

E.L-R: The challenges were mainly setting up a mechanism for making it a refereed journal. As I say, the first two years – 2003, 2004 – we went on with what we had done before: soliciting articles. And doing some editing, but not refusing any articles. Then we decided that in January 2005, we were going with a refereed journal. We changed the name so that it would reflect . . .

CD: The UWI brand?

E.L-R: The UWI, so in a sense still *YouWeQ*, but the *UWI Quality Education Forum*, which was really what this was, because it was really ‘quality education forum, UWI’, and we decided we would do it once a year, and it would be a properly refereed journal. It was half and half the first year because we were reporting on surveys that had been commissioned by BUS . . .

CD: Yes. I just read them over and they’re still relevant . . . so many of the points.

## Quality Assurance Mechanisms Introduced

E.L-R: And you must realise also that we were linking very much with the initiatives on the campuses. For example, student assessments of teaching had not been done before. And this was now part of the undertakings being expected from campuses in their thrust towards quality assurance, so it was good for that. Eventually we realised that we were not just working on quality ‘assurance’, but also moving into quality ‘enhancement’, and we had a Conference addressing this issue, so we were really able to ‘select’ [*articles for the QEF journal*] because we had so many people presenting at the conference.

CD: And the conference was in 2005 as well, right?

E.L-R: Right.

CD: First conference

E.L-R: Right, so this was January 2006 [*points to issue*], and also that was where we selected papers from the conference. So in a sense this was a conference manual.

CD: So I asked you what the challenges were. I should also ask you what you see as the successes specifically. What were they? Do you think you got enough traction?

E.L-R: Well, the whole quality initiative was developing so rapidly and a lot of people in the institution did not understand how things would change and what would be expected of them; so for instance, the QA staff held seminars with faculties, and different innovations were introduced at the same time. For example, the Instructional Development Unit [today’s ‘Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning’] came on stream because teaching quality was now major. ‘How is teaching going to enhance quality?’ And I remember having discussions and actually preparing a handbook on teaching which was supposed to be handed to each new member of staff, plus the whole business of encouraging faculty members to attend sessions at the Instructional Development Unit.

CD: Training sessions.

E.L-R: Yes. Quality audits were also introduced; each Faculty was expected to do a quality audit. This was a quality review at both departmental and faculty levels at the end of each year, you know, sort of like an annual report?

CD: Right.

E.L-R: But it was supposed to be more than that. So it was supposed to be expanded to include things like how many students . . .

CD: Turnover and that kind of thing?

E.L-R: Yes, turnover. Things like grades. What were they like? Did you have a large number failing? If you did, what did you do about it? And you know, it was a sort of a quality manual audit kind of exercise which Faculties were expected to do which would all feed into . . .

CD: . . . into assessment probably? Student assessment by that time?

E.L-R: Right. Earlier, when the QA thrust was first introduced, I was Deputy Principal on the Mona Campus, and Professor Hamilton was PVC for BUS. I started on the campus an Academic Quality Assurance Committee (AQAC) because there was no established standard to determine why, how, and what faculty members were teaching. So course outlines had to be submitted to this new Committee, AQAC, for approval. That was very revealing actually. Because a lot of faculty did not have course outlines or 'proper' course outlines, and what was clear also was that they did not know how to write them. So the whole business of setting objectives, for example, and linking objectives to assessments, became the content of workshops. And the Instructional Development Unit prepared and delivered them. I was involved in a number of the workshops, in terms of teaching colleagues how to write a course outline, how to write specific objectives and general objectives, how to link assessment with their objectives, the content, how relevant is the content, how often should you change it. All of that was part of the AQAC committee initially. And it has continued because courses have to be approved now.

- CD: So that was a part of the mandate?
- E.L-R: Yes . . . because the ‘courses’ were to be approved at campus level, but ‘programmes’ at regional level, so programmes went to BUS, and had to be approved by the Board for Undergraduate Studies.
- CD: Ok. The fact that we are a regional university . . . everything is so much more complex. Even the whole business now of harmonisation of courses that are offered with different course codes. We have a meeting coming up now with the same thing. The same courses and different course codes, so we are supposed to be trying to rationalise that.
- E.L-R: It’s just ‘One UWI’ now.
- CD: It needs to be. But increasingly you don’t feel as if you ARE one UWI.
- E.L-R: That’s the thing. That was one of the better things “during my time” as I would put it, because we used to have a University Dean, so one of the three deans – one of the three campus deans – was the University Dean, and we would meet for examination purposes at the end of examiners’ meeting, and we would discuss issues like curriculum. Not that the curricula were exactly the same, but at least when we had a University Dean, there was some sort of understanding, some sort of coordination across the campuses. But what happened when the University Dean was abandoned (the post), each campus dean became autonomous. So now it’s back to putting things together, and that I think is difficult.
- CD: Right, which is what I think the Board for Undergraduate Studies tries to do, to try to have these cross-campus meetings occasionally, and bring us to the ‘One UWI’ thing. So I suppose that is the feather we have in our cap, that is, the right to say we are a top ‘regional’ university.
- E.L-R: Yes . . . yes. One of the two in the world.
- CD: From what you are saying here, there has been quite a lot of success in terms of where we would have started, by implementing this kind of quality imperative and the different kinds of systems.

E.L-R: Oh yes. I think it has been one of the successes of the Report from the Chancellor in 1994, because it changed a lot of what had been happening and which had not been pulled together at all . . .

CD: The Chancellor at the time would have been . . . ?

E.L-R: Sir Shridath Ramphal. When he took over in 1994, for one year he gathered a group of university and other relevant people to form a commission: the Chancellor's Commission. *Report of the Chancellor's Commission on Governance* actually determined that there would be a Board for Undergraduate Studies, a Board for Graduate Studies, Board for Research . . . and they would be responsible for the whole quality initiative and the students there.

CD: So, any other thing about the journal that you consider important to its history in terms of supporters or any detractors?

E.L-R: Well, there was resistance in terms of quality assurance itself and there was resistance when AQAC was introduced and started to insist on faculty writing and submitting course outlines . . . there was resistance. But I think, you know, after a while everybody gets into the swing and starts understanding . . . this is how we operate, so this is what we do. The journal was useful in terms of assisting – not just the journal, but also the fact that we had a Quality Assurance Unit. It was useful in assisting other institutions to understand what quality assurance was, and even though we had an accreditation agency – the University Council of Jamaica – I think in a way they also became aware of the fact that 'internal' quality assurance was important, and linked it now with their work, so that they now expect institutions to have an internal quality assurance unit of some sort or a committee to see that certain things are in place.

CD: The quality assurance review that departments have every five years? That would have started with the Quality Assurance Unit?

E.L-R: Yes. That was a major element of their portfolio; they set up the review cycle; they identify qualified persons who are part of the review team. There was a structure: an external person, a person from another cam-

pus, a person from industry. So the team visited and did the reviews. And as I say, every five years.

CD: And a lot of other places, as you say, are now modelling it.

E.L-R: This is the thing. It is expensive, but it is also essential if you are going to maintain the quality required for your graduates to be regionally and internationally recognised. Because many of our graduates go abroad, and so you need to have that reputation that says, “Oh, UWI graduate? We know the ‘*quality*’ of that graduate”.

CD: I see . . . along the lines of the ‘ideal UWI graduate’, I guess, one we now portray as possessing specific attributes such as being a competent communicator, and a **critical and creative thinker**. OK, so let me just thank you and your colleagues for having invested so much time and energy in spreading the quality assurance message and getting ‘buy-in’ for it. Thanks also, of course, for so willingly consenting to being interviewed for the journal.

E.L-R: Thanks to you too and to the *QEF* editorial team. It was my pleasure.