MEASURING PROGRAMME QUALITY IN THE SCHOOL OF VETERINARY MEDICINE, 1994 TO 2000: THE SEARCH FOR MEANINGFUL PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the construction of performance indicators to measure programme quality at the School of Veterinary Medicine, University of the West Indies, St. Augustine. It is argued that value-added indicators provide greater insight into the productivity of complex multi-stage programmes. Using data for the classes of 1994 to 2000, 5 indicators of completion and 2 value-added indices of achievement were constructed. The value-added indicators compared ability on entry with (1) achievement by Phase and (2) final degree quality. Despite the small numbers of students in the programme, completion rates declined considerably, with the proportion of students graduating on time below 75% for the graduating classes of 1999 and 2000. The value-added indices revealed differential performances among males and females at various stages of the programme. Notably, males underperformed in the earlier stages whereas females had difficulty in the later clinically oriented stages of the programme (Phase V). However, both males and females found Phase II difficult. Suggestions for the reform of the education provision are included.

Key words: Performance Indicators; Value-Added effectiveness; Male underachievement; Student progression and achievement

INTRODUCTION

With rising costs to both governments and societies, universities worldwide are grappling with the competing issues of accountability and quality. Increasing international competition coupled with economic stringency in the region have also made these issues important watchwords in the University of the West Indies (UWI). For small, specialized UWI departments such as the School of Veterinary Medicine (SVM), continued survival is dependent upon attracting new clients through better marketing and an improved education product. With these goals in mind, the SVM undertook a review of the Doctor of Veterinary Medicine (DVM) programme in 2000. One of the critical questions considered was, “what was the level of student achievement and rates of progression within the old programme?”

Performance indicators (PIs) easily summarise theoretical concepts such as efficiency, cost-effectiveness, and productivity and are therefore useful in describing the quality of programmes (1). In the developed world, universities are often mandated to report quantitative PIs, such as failure rates, distribution of degree classes, percentage numbers graduating on time, and completion rates (2). On the other hand, in the UWI, the reporting and use of PIs in programme review and evaluation is still in its infancy. Nevertheless, faculties are now required to generate PIs in the self-assessment stage of the quality assurance process, answering typical questions such as “what, if any, is the relationship between entry qualifications and performance?” and “what are the completion or throughput rates, for both full-time and part-time students?” (3)

The planning unit in the UWI is also keen on encouraging faculties to make better use of PIs as part of the overall strategic management process. For example, the new planning framework emphasized:

The attention accorded throughput rates in the current plan was fully justified and it is of the utmost importance that emphasis should continue to be placed on the improvement of these rates in the new plan period . . . . Faculties, the board of studies, and the registrars should actively monitor the throughput measures and the factors contributing to unsatisfactory performance, p. 29 (4).

However, despite this encouragement, most faculties have found that existing data management systems are inadequate and severely limit the availability of both centralized and faculty specific data (5). However, even in the UK, centrally developed PIs have limited value.