

THE HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES OF QUALITY ASSURANCE IN SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION

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ABSTRACT

Quality Assurance has changed drastically in the last five years and these changes have impacted heavily on the operation of Higher Education Institutions in South Africa. The paper will review the process of quality assurance from as early as Certification of Council of Technikons Education (SERTEC) and Quality Promotion Unit (QPU) days. SERTEC and QPU did, pave the way for the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) to perform its roles as assigned by the Council of Higher Education (CHE).

1. INTRODUCTION

Globalisation is the name of the game for every organisation worldwide. Globalisation in Higher Education Institutions can only be persuaded if institutions of Higher Education compete international. To compete international Higher Education Institutions are under pressure to improve the quality of their academic programmes.

Higher Education Institutions has been affected by the high enrolment rate. Fourie (2000:50) states that Higher Education Institutions have expanded from an elite system to a massified system that has led educators and administrators having to deal with larger and more diverse students' bodies. Government seems to be putting more emphasis in ensuring that Higher Education Institution is accountable for their actions.

It is clear that Higher Education Institutions have a massive responsibility. This responsibility involves dealing with high students' numbers, as well as competing internationally without compromising quality of their academic programmes.

This paper will look at the historical overview of quality assurance and how it contributed to the practise of quality assurance in South Africa Higher Education Institutions.

2. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

2.1 CERTIFICATION COUNCIL FOR TECHNIKON EDUCATION

The Council was established in terms of section 2 of the Certification Council for Technikon Education (SERTEC) Act, 1986 (Act 88 of 1986). The act elaborated on the roles and functions that the Council must perform:

- Section 3 of the act indicated that it must ensure that corresponding certificates, issued by the Council represent the same standard of education and examination,

- the act allowed the Council to withdraw accreditation of qualifications if required to do so. This will be done if the qualification no longer complies with the norms and standards (SERTEC, 1998: 1)

Genis (2002: 64) argues that historically Technikons were not autonomous. Central control was a main problem. To attain some level of autonomy, the Committee of Technikon Principals introduced the council to assist them. This was done within the process of benchmarking Technikons with Polytechnics in the United Kingdom.

According to Jacobs (1996:5) the increasing external pressure for accountability in higher education, requires urgent attention to the internal quality assurance processes by all higher education institutions. A traditional system of external examiners; although necessary, were no longer factor as the only means of ensuring quality.

2.1.1 The purpose of SERTEC

The purpose of SERTEC was to:

- Satisfy the demands of accountability
- Promote improvements (Jacobs, 1988:16)

The purpose can be further elaborated by saying that it was to assure equality of standard across the Technikons and to certify successful learning.

2.1.2 The operation of SERTEC

The process of SERTEC normally used to starts with the institutional mission statement. The mission statement was taken as a point of departure to determine if plans of the institution are driven towards achieving their desired results. The process was evidence based. Self-evaluation was used as a starting point by the institution to validate their claims and indicate their strength, opportunity, weakness and threats. To establish if the Technikons do what they are supposed to do, site evaluation was done.

A team of experts was sent to the Technikon being evaluated. This team comprised of official of SERTEC, members of the professional bodies and academic from other Technikons. The following parties formed part of the interviews during site visit:

- Institutional Management
- Dean of the Faculty
- Head of Department
- Lecturers
- Allumni (former students)
- Current students

SERTEC looked at the accreditation of an academic program from the following line of arguments:

- Staffing
- Infrastructure
- Teaching and Learning
- Library
- Facilities available as well as the role of industry in the programme.

During SERTEC all facilities were inspected for example:

- Library
- Office Space for the lecturers
- Classroom and laboratory
- Computer for Staff
- Computer laboratory for students
- Security of question paper

The site visit used to take a minimum of two days. During the last day the panel presented its preliminary report to the institution being evaluated.

2.2 QUALITY PROMOTION UNIT

Noruwana (1997:63) is clearly demonstrating the importance of quality assurance by saying that “Quality Assurance is as old as Universities in South Africa”. Universities were concerned about the quality of their teaching and the Committee of University Principal (CUP) felt that something must be done. The CUP decided to form a task team to look at the establishment of a quality body for Universities and this team made a positive recommendation to the CUP (Noruwana, 1997:63).

The decision to constitute a Quality Promotion Unit (QPU) for South African Universities were taken by the then CUP. The driving force behind establishing QPU was based on the scenario that this body will advise and support universities so that they can maintain and improve the quality of educational programme. QPU was independent from any university. Its review teams reflected a wide range of experiences. The QPU was accountable to the CUP.

2.2.1 Purpose of quality promotion unit

According to Hay (2000:62-63) the establishment of the QPU was regarded as a major step in University Quality Assurance in South Africa. The establishment of the QPU was initiated for the following reasons:

- assisting university in conducting productive institutional self-evaluation at a different levels
- creating a basis in the higher education system for development,
- Promoting accreditation for purpose of articulation.

2.2.2 THE OPERATION OF FOCUS FOR THE QUALITY PROMOTION UNIT

The QPU focused only on the following aspects:

- Staffing, institutional governance
- Resources
- Staff development

The process of the QPU started with the institutional mission statement. The mission statement was taken as a point of departure to determine if plans of the institution are driven towards achieving its desired mission. The process was evidence based. The institution would have perform its own institutional self-evaluation. Any form of improvement must be indicated.

Information required for self-evaluation was:

- Admission, qualifications on entry
- Dropout rates, qualification awarded
- Library, office space for the lecturers
- Classroom and laboratory
- Computer for staff, computer laboratory for students
- Security of question paper

This process was not for accreditation but for improvements purposes.

3. ESTABLISHMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION QUALITY ASSURANCE COMMITTEE

The Higher Education Act 1997 assigned responsibility for quality assurance in higher education in South Africa to the Council of Higher Education. This responsibility is discharged through its permanent sub-committee, the Higher Education Quality Committee.

The principle underlying the establishment of Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) is based on coordinating a single higher education quality assurance body. The HEQC is responsible for assuring quality of all Higher Education Institutions in South Africa.

It is important for Higher Education Institutions to take very seriously the purpose of the HEQC which will ultimately influence the way in which higher education institution in South Africa do their businesses. The HEQC has three purposes namely: quality promotion; quality audit and programme accreditation.

3.1 The operation of HIGHER EDUCATION QUALITY COMMITTEE

The HEQC has a set of nineteen (19) criteria that constitute a crucial component in executing its functions, fulfil the dual purpose of serving as

evaluative tools for the HEQC audits and accreditations activities, as well as setting a broad benchmark for quality management.

The HEQC is looking at the following aspects:

- institutional quality development
- teaching and learning
- research
- community engagement

The process of the HEQC starts with the institution's mission statement. The mission statement will be taken as a point of departure to determine if plans of the institution are driven towards achieving its desired mission. The process is evidence based led. The HEQC developed criteria that are currently being used by Higher Education Institutions. Unlike SERTEC, the HEQC provide training for evaluators, at this training evaluators are guided on how to undertake the site visits.

Based on the criteria institutions will develop a portfolio of evidence. These criteria put more emphasis on the minimum standard that must be attained. The portfolio of evidence will be sent to the HEQC for analyses.

This will be followed by the site visit. A well trained team of experts will be sent to the institution. This team will comprise primarily of peers. The following representatives will form part of the site visit:

- Institutional Management
- Dean of the Faculty, Head of Department, Lecturers
- Alumni and current students

During site visit facilities will also be inspected for example:

- Library
- Office Space for the lecturers
- Classroom and laboratory
- Computer for Staff
- Computer laboratory for students
- Security of question paper

The site visit will take a minimum of two days. The panel will submit their findings in a report format to the HEQC. The HEQC will co-ordinator a review team to look at all reports submitted by evaluators. Once the reports have been standardised the HEQC will release the preliminary results confidential to the universities.

The university are given a certain period of time to counter or agree on what is written in the report. The HEQC will then take all the reports and table them at the board for finalisation.

4. CONCLUSION

The paper clearly demonstrates different approaches to quality assurance. The paper also looks at the operational part of HEQC which is not totally isolated from the former SERTEC and QPU. The new quality assurance brings a new dimension in place and it is clearly demonstrating what the White Paper objectives are for creating a single coordinated higher education quality assurance body.

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