

QUALITY CONSIDERATIONS IN SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

The implementation of quality assurance systems in higher education have never been accepted without debate nor severe critique. This can partially be ascribed to academics' strong views on academic freedom and autonomy. In this paper an admissible distinction between quality assurance and quality enhancement as two entries on a continuum is made.

A plea is made that Southern African higher education institutions should invest in establishing self-reflective practices rather than a culture of compliances. The author concludes that quality enhancement embedded in a self-evaluation approach has the potential to make a contribution towards transforming the South African higher education system in more than one way.

1. INTRODUCTION

During recent years higher education has been the subject of increasing criticism not only in South Africa, but also worldwide. In responding to this, governments have moved to make higher education institutions more accountable for especially the money they receive from them. Equally important is the impact of external forces such as financial constraints, the massification of higher education, developments in information technology and global claims on the demand for quality enhancement. How different higher education systems are responding to the imperatives of quality, quality assurance and quality enhancement differs among the contexts, needs and

developmental levels of the various systems. What is emanating from literature perspectives, is the tension between improvement and accountability, not necessarily viewed as two extremes on a continuum, but sometimes rather as a matter of focus, as well as transformation and control issues. Obviously the approach a specific country is following, is influenced by political, economical, social and cultural characteristics and realities, in addition to being underpinned by values such as participatory decision-making processes, transparency, accountability and shared responsibility.

2. CRITIQUE AGAINST QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEMS

Elton (1992) makes an admissible distinction between quality assurance and quality enhancement. According to him, quality assurance is about accountability, audit and assessment. Furthermore it is concerned with control of both quality and the people who control quality. Quality enhancement is related to empowerment, enthusiasm, expertise and excellence. Looking at these two as two entries on a continuum, poses questions like the following: Which one is more appropriate? Which one will achieve better results? Can we combine them? How do we ensure that quality assurance does not become a pen and paper exercise and does not lead to compliance and a managerial function? What do we do to ensure that it becomes internally driven and is inspired by professionalism and work ethics?

One of the criticisms against the way in which current quality assurance mechanisms are implemented is the fact that academics often view it as an imposition by university management or state regulatory bodies. Usually it describes threshold levels of acceptance, which many academics find unacceptable. It is argued that the setting of such minimum standards will lead to mediocrity and not to excellence.

Most quality assurance systems share the following:

- They are imposed top-down by university management or by funding or accreditation bodies, including professional boards.

- Participation is usually compulsory.
- A strong element of peer review exists.
- Although the system seeks to establish acceptable standards, such standards are rarely defined and, if so, they are vague and open for interpretation.
- In cases where standards are met, funding or accreditation may be withdrawn or, as in the case of lecturing staff, it may lead to non-renewal of contracts. However, little evidence exists that this does happen in practice.
- Institutions, departments or faculties rated into categories of “high” quality rarely receive extra funding.
- Increased administrative workloads for those involved.
- Only those involved in the process know what is expected and are informed.

3. QUALITY ENHANCEMENT AS THE PRIMARY DRIVING FORCE

Quality enhancement aims for the overall improvement of quality in providers' offerings. It strives to cultivate a culture of reflective practices, an introspection of what staff are doing, why they do it in that particular way and attempts to identify areas and ways to improve what they are supposed to do. Whilst quality assurance mechanisms are imposed from above, quality enhancement cannot be imposed by regulation and requires academics to participate voluntarily; it is driven intrinsically to exceed and perform. Usually quality enhancement is a bottom-up orientation. A system based on quality enhancement is usually known for the following:

It is usually initiated by bodies such as educational development units or academics themselves.

- Participation is voluntary.
- The process is through either attending workshop-type sessions or participating in projects.
- The improvement of teaching and learning is a strong focus and is viewed as a striving for excellence, since many schemes of this type attract the better teachers.

Van der Westhuizen and Fourie (2002) analysed general trends in quality assurance and created the following summarised version of international quality assurance systems:

PRIMARY ATTRIBUTES	RANGE OF BEHAVIOUR		
Purpose	Improvement	Public accountability	Government goals (targeting resources, rationalisation)
Administrative responsibility/ initiator/ ownership	Institutions themselves/ sectoral agency	Buffer body	Government agency
Participation	Voluntary (usually on the institutional level)	Compulsory (usually on programme level)	
Primary procedures/ methodologies	Self-evaluation processes	External peer review	Performance indicators, statistics, benchmarking, standardisation
Framework for judgements	Stated intentions	Peer opinions	Norms, criteria, comparisons
Focus or unit of analysis	Institutional or institution-wide audits (vertical)	Programme or departmental review (horizontal)	Functions, projects, units, issues
Costs	Institutional contributions	Buffer body/professional association	Government
Incentives or sanctions	No link to funding	Indirect link to funding	Direct link to funding
Reporting and follow-up	Confidential reports	Public reports	Accreditation, ranking

Van der Westhuizen and Fourie (2002:17)

Table 1: International trends in quality assurance systems

In analysing some international trends in quality assurance systems, the above-mentioned authors made some observations pertaining to external reviews (quality audits):

- The biggest value of quality assurance systems based on self-evaluation is the self-reflection they engender.
- Short-term planning and objectives seem to dominate

the preparation of institutions for the external review process.

- Academics are concerned about the increase of workload posed by a paper exercise approach to quality assurance.
- Legitimacy of the external quality management systems and the degree to which they are supported by institutions can be an obstacle.
- External review should in all instances lead to improvement, otherwise the exercise is not worthwhile, also in terms of money spent.

What seems to emanate from the international experiences is that the implementation of any quality assurance system and its approach is indeed a balancing act and an inappropriate inclination could lead to an imbalance of the specific nature, practices and purposes of higher education.

4. THE IMPLEMENTATION OF A QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM IN SOUTH AFRICA

Since 1994 the South African higher education system has been undergoing major changes and a variety of policy acts [e.g. the Higher Education, NQF/SAQA, Labour Relations, Employment Equity and Skills Development Acts; the White Papers; and the HEQC of the CHE Founding Documents (RSA DoE 1998, 1999; RSA MoE 2001, 2002; CHE 2001)] and initiatives were posed to drive the transformation process. On the one hand, these acts were in part attempts to redress the inequalities of the past and to serve as change agents for social development. On the other hand, policies related to quality assurance should indeed be viewed as sincere attempts to enhance the quality of higher education provision in South Africa; to respond to global imperatives; and to contribute towards a well-educated workforce able to cope with the pace of a variety of developments.

5. THE SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION QUALITY COMMITTEE (HEQC)

A milestone in the development of the South African quality assurance system was the implementation of an interim Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) in June 1999 to investigate how best to establish a national quality assurance system for South Africa. The interim HEQC believed strongly that - in order to identify best practices for the new HEQC it should examine past and current quality assurance practices in South Africa, in addition to acquiring some international comparative perspectives. One of its first tasks was to evaluate the Certification Council for Technikon Education (SERTEC) and of the former Quality Promotion Unit (QPU) of the South African Universities' Vice-Chancellors' Association (SAUVCA). Stemming from this evaluation, certain signposts were erected:

- A quality assurance agency should not operate without appropriate staff and resources.
- A quality assurance agency should not try to achieve everything at once.
- Do only those things for which there are the necessary resources and expertise.
- Be realistic in terms of what can be achieved in the present circumstances.

The founding document of the HEQC gave further momentum to the Education White Paper 3 (RSA DoE1997:4) and emphasised its commitment to a "... quality driven higher education system that contributes to socio-economic development, social justice and innovative scholarship in South Africa. The primary objective of this committee is to ensure that education, training, research and community service of high quality are delivered". Two years further down the line it is important to reflect on where we are heading, what can be possible stumbling-blocks and what can be done to ensure that we do not repeat the mistakes of other countries' higher education systems and to identify supportive ways to give impetus to the enhancement of quality assurance in South Africa.

6. FACTORS WHICH MAY IMPACT NEGATIVELY ON THE SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM

It is a pity that South African society is currently facing so many change processes simultaneously. This is also true of the higher education system and of academics who are supposed to adhere to political, socio-economic imperatives as well as global demands. It would have been easier to respond to only one or two imperatives at a time but this is simply impossible. Already it has been said that South African academics are burnt out in attempting to respond to all the policy demands. If so much has to change, it will be very difficult to determine any single success. Surely a more gradual implementation of change is more desirable. However, it seems as if there are a few barriers to overcome before it will be possible to have a system that will be acceptable to all those involved.

6.1 An infringement on the nature of higher education institutions

Brennan, De Vries and Williams (1997) discuss the typical controversies surrounding the quality debate. They are of the opinion that the word "quality" encompasses values, which some academics find inappropriate and intimidating to the underpinning values of academic life. Often skepticism is expressed about the appropriateness of implementing terminology, systems and frameworks typical from the corporate and manufacturing world in higher education. Quality has become a buzzword of our time and is often misused to sell products and services to clients, irrespective of whether this particular service or product will stand the test of time.

In South Africa many higher education institutions brought the word "quality" or "excellence" into their vision statements as a way of conveying the message that what they do, is of high quality. Ironically, if staff are asked to elaborate on their "quality"

vision, there seems to be little agreement or explanation on what the institution means with it, nor on how it is achieved. Concerns are expressed about the effect a checklist approach may have on the higher education system, whilst little opportunity may be left for academics to utilise their academic freedom.

Brennan *et al.* (1997:5) posit an important reflection by stating that "... changes have little to do with quality assessment directly". What these authors are arguing, is that the influence of moving from an elitist to a massified higher education system by responding with greater diversification in terms of programmes, courses, modes of deliveries, greater relevance in research, financial realities, etc., may lead to a decline in the status and remuneration of conditions of work associated with academic life thus indirectly infringing on quality.

6.2 Power and ideology

Although higher education institutions are typified as professional bureaucracies known for their autonomy, different sources of power and control representing government, the academic markets and stakeholders greatly influence their functioning. The government, as the primary funding agency, sets the pace for change and dictates the imperatives which institutions have to adhere to. In South Africa it is anticipated that the new funding formulae for higher education will clearly spell out to institution what types of programmes they have to embark on, which students have to be enrolled and which disciplines they have to invest in not only as ways to transform, but also as money spinners. Some academics view these developments as one way of government to control the higher education system and a way of ensuring that political objectives are met. In this regard the decisive and expanded role that Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) are playing, as well as the proposed role of Education and Training Quality Assurers (ETQAs), the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) and the implications of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), are often questioned and viewed as the beginning of [over-] regulation by the state. Such a variety of bodies involved in quality assurance may lead to a conflict of interest, causes a duplication of functions and roles, confusion,

even chaos and eventually resistance and compliance in an attempt to give them what they want.

There is, however, also still a debate on who is supposed to set standards, whose quality we are talking about and which notions and definitions are most appropriate for our context. Given the South African history with its historically advantaged (typified as institutions with a lack in quality of qualifications, tuition, services and research outputs) and disadvantaged institutions (known for "higher" quality, better qualifications, staff and research outputs), one can understand that quality issues have the potential to evoke certain emotions. The attempt of the Minister of Education to incorporate certain historically disadvantaged institutions into so-called "white" institutions should be applauded as it is one, if not the only, way to eradicate the stigma attached to historically disadvantaged institutions.

6.3 Lack of human and infrastructural resources

A study undertaken from 1999–2000 by Strydom (2001) on national organisations involved in quality assurance in some way or another brought to the fore that most quality assurance structures experience a lack of human, physical and financial resources to operate maximally. The lack of sound communication among bodies, government officials and institutions does not contribute towards the establishment of good practices. Additionally, the study identified the lack of clear leadership at different levels of national organisations as frustrating. Costs involved in the implementation of a quality assurance system on the institutional level should not be done in a haphazard way, as the preparation of a self-evaluation on institutional and programme level can be considerable if the time of staff and students is taken into consideration.

7. MOVING FROM QUALITY ASSURANCE TO ENHANCEMENT

The ideal of quality assurance in South Africa should be to move or to make a shift from quality assurance towards quality enhancement. A first step in this regard would be to install a

culture of self-reflective p

el or a committee. Ownership of the system seems to be a prerequisite in installing a quality culture. Obviously it will not be possible to move away completely from quality assurance schemes and procedures, but the idea is to invest in a diversified quality portfolio. Therefore a limited proportion of institutional funds should be allocated to quality assurance schemes, whilst the majority of funds should be made available for quality improvement and quality enhancement schemes and activities. From time to time institutions should be

- Are the quality control schemes effective in improving the quality of the institution's core business (e.g. teaching, research and community/service learning)?
- Do the outcomes of the measures justify costs?
- Would simpler and less costly schemes be as effective?

Caution should be taken not to over-invest in workshop-type schemes for quality enhancement. Research shows that the best returns from investment in the quality process come from projects, supported by grants if necessary.

Quality enhancement has implications for academic staff developers and academic development units. The extent to which the effects upon the practice of educational developers correspond with the implications for institutions depends upon the extent to which the policies and practices of the department and developers are in accord with those of the institution. The Journal for New Generation Scientists and Interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary research with two annual editions (July and December) has been managed since its inception in 1990. The editorial committee does not necessarily support the views and/or conclusions published in the Journal. The recent investment has probably been biased towards quality assurance, as it is that

type of approach that management can impose, direct and require participation in. To determine whether the institution follows a balanced approach, it is necessary to evaluate the institution's approach. Such an evaluation should focus upon the impact of the monitoring or initiatives upon teaching and learning, rather than merely gathering, for example, staff reactions. Most institutions have a preponderance of quality assurance measures. In such cases, it is likely that a redirection of resources towards quality enhancement will be more effective in bringing about an improvement.

8. SUMMATIVE PERSPECTIVES

The implementation of any quality assurance system should be handled with great sensitivity, thorough research, critical thoughts, careful planning and focusing on what is achievable. The reasons, purposes and characteristics should relate directly to the bigger landscape of, for example, the "size and shape" of the institutional and national higher education landscape, governance, funding, three-year rolling plans, programme mix documents, future needs, the qualifications framework, access, articulation and broader transformation issues. Changes in each of these areas will have implications for institutional and national quality assurance.

In addition, the purposes based on reasons for quality assurance in higher education should be carefully chosen, clearly articulated, agreed to and phased in through a process of consensus and capacity-building so that the quality assurance system is at least well understood and accepted, as it is phased in over a certain period of time.

Cognisance should be taken and preventative measures put in place to ensure that serious mismatches between reasons and purposes on the one hand, and structures on the other, are common enough in quality assurance systems to raise questions about the general level of understanding of these matters. The following serve as examples:

- Processes that are intended to ensure the public about quality, but which employ no independent reviews of

peers and stakeholders or, conversely, audit and assessment processes described as improvement-oriented but which do not include participatory self-evaluation components, are often encountered.

- Purpose-process mismatches such as evaluative attempts to make programmes more competitive or acceptable, but which use only available internal management information, or cases where public comparative ratings or lists of failures are used to all to see, thereby injuring the very programmes which were intended to be improved.
- Quality assurance systems usually have multiple purposes and there are practical limits to means of accommodating and funding them. The structures and characteristics should achieve a reasonable match with the purposes and means of a quality assurance system.
- The ideal quality assurance system should be phased in over a period of five to 10 years. There is no quick fix when dealing with the complexities and quality of quality assurance.

The hope is expressed that South African quality assurance should foster a culture of self-reflecting practices in which quality assurance will be intrinsically driven. The restoring of sound work ethics in higher education could give momentum to this. What seems more important, is that academics should undergo a heart transfer taking responsibility for the quality of all their teaching, research and community service practices and not wait for external and mechanical processes and procedures dictating what and how things should be done.

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