

# The Challenge Faced by Higher Education Institutions: A Quality Agenda

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**ABSTRACT** The purpose of the study is to evaluate the impact of self-evaluation in the academic programmes of universities of Technology. Forty-five heads of departments from four universities were used as participants of the study. The results showed that in the quest for modernity, Higher Education Institutions should invest much time in the preparation of self-evaluation. The study further proposed that the findings of the self-evaluation process be used to benchmark faculties, and departments at Higher Education Institutions, but also institutions should be able to benchmark with other quality models worldwide to share best practices. The findings of this study have confirmed and affirmed the importance of institutional self-evaluation in building and enhancing a quality culture within universities. Coming up with a prescriptive model would be a serious misjudgement as quality indicators are based on different principles in various institutions. In supporting the model process, the research has not proposed any particular model so that academics will not feel bound to a structure coming from certain legislative requirements as part of the higher education quality committee criteria that serve as a blueprint for any quality matters at institutions.

## INTRODUCTION

Quality assurance is so omnipresent and its vocabulary so pervasive nowadays in Higher Education (HE) policy and discourse that one forgets how relatively recent the enthronement of the term "quality" actually is. It is also a fact that over the last decades, the context in which higher education (HE) operates has changed considerably due to a number of factors such as the emergence of market tools of public policy, the rise of the new public management policy, globalisation and the growing interference of the government in Higher Education (HE). In this regard, quality assurance (QA) is seen as the process of assuring accountability through the measurement and evaluation of the effectiveness and efficiency of the transformed higher education institutions (HEI's). Important differences exist among countries and regions of the world with regard to their approach to QA. In addition to numerous national overviews, numbers of studies have tried to outline the international variations and to systematize the different models used (Verkleij 2000: 90). For the purpose of this study, it is critical that we look at the international standard of self-evaluation in the selected institutions.

HEI's are beginning to wake up to the need for building up self-evaluation and more generally an internal quality culture. However, several questions remain unanswered: Does the self-evaluation reveal the entire reality of an institution? Is self-evaluation capable of addressing every challenge met by the institution? How do we distinguish the picture given by the self-evaluation from the overall reality?

The problem that this study investigated was whether the application of internal QA mechanisms by UoT's really achieves the intended outcomes.

## Review of Related Literature

### *Overview of Quality Assurance*

The concept of quality is not new; it has always been part of the academic tradition. It is the outside world that now emphasises the need for attention to quality, with the relationship between HEIs and society having changed. This encapsulates the profound changes in the context of HE; including growth, diversity, changes in size and in the nature of HE. This has been accompanied by a growing state interest in quality, demands for accountability and the establishment of national quality agencies (Newton

2007: 14). The notion of quality covers those elements of an HEI culture that have the strongest impact on quality teaching.

Given South Africa's history with its discrepancies between historically disadvantaged institutions and historically advantaged institutions, quality as a phenomenon, will not be accepted by all in the HE community with equal enthusiasm.

### *Quality Assurance within HE*

The use of external examiners, self-evaluation and academic audits are the most common forms of quality assurance processes. Institutions readily accept self-evaluation because it empowers them and their staff to take charge of the quality of their performance without the pressure usually associated with external review. Self-evaluation also helps institutions to identify their own strength and weaknesses, while generating awareness of key performance indicators. As noted above, it is the process of self-evaluation that is widely seen as the most valuable aspect of quality assurance processes. The capacity-building function of self-evaluation is particularly important in the countries of Sub-Saharan Africa where capacity remains very weak (Okebukola 2006: 18).

One way of demonstrating quality to the outside world is by putting quality management systems in place. Inside the HE institutions significant changes have taken place. Along with the transformation from the elite clientele in HE, the institutions of HE are seeing a different type of student now entering. Nowadays, students are viewed as consumers with all the rights and measures of protection afforded to consumers. They too have the right to demand value for money (Vroeijenstijn 2001: 66).

An essential element for any quality conscious institution is a regular review of its systems – not the type of review under pressure that comes with external panel visits, but ones that involve consideration over time and revision on the basis of reflection and internal debate. As systems and courses stabilise, more time and energy has become available, leading to major overhauls of a number of the internal QA systems (Hoecht 2006: 29). It is a fact that HE in particular, seeks to simplify, to increase participation and ownership, and to raise the awareness of quality issues.

### *Self-evaluation for Improvement of Accountability*

Improvement and/or accountability are the primary purposes of QA. External bodies, such as the HEQC in South Africa, can determine and enforce these purposes. The willingness to improve and to be accountable is, however, ultimately the responsibility of the institution itself. Thus, the institution is the determinant of its own quality. On the one hand, improvement is a matter of institutional integrity and is only possible with constructive co-operation; on the other hand, accountability “involves rendering some form of account that an activity is being carried out effectively and efficiently” (Favish 2005: 110).

These two purposes – improvement and accountability - are often regarded as incompatible, but they are not mutually exclusive. The challenge, according to Favish (2005: 110), is to achieve clarity and conformity as to the equilibrium that is sought between accountability and improvement. Favish (2005: 110) has written extensively on accountability. She defines it as “the obligation to report to others, to explain, to justify, to answer question about how resources have been used and to what effect”. The extent to which accountability exists within an institution is determined by the organisational structure, its culture and procedure, and where decision-making powers lie. It is clear that the tension between the two purposes of QA cannot be ignored. It is also clear that the HEQC's documents on institutional audits and on programme accreditation (HEQC 2004) regard self-evaluation as being of major importance.

### **METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS**

The methodological aspects were meticulously followed with the selected universities of technology (UoTs), as per the sample of the study of four institutions which were required to participate. The study was grounded in an interpretivist approach which requires the researcher to view things from realistic ideologies in action, which emphasises and enhances the reporting aspect as it interprets ‘what is going on’ in different ways. The researcher collected quality empirical data from the QAM and HOD revolutionaries for scientific analysis and con-

clusion. Interviews were conducted subsequent to the distribution and collection of the questionnaires. Fifty questionnaires were distributed to all participants and forty-five were recorded as returned questionnaires. According to Cohen et al. (2007: 9-10), more than 30% is regarded as a good response rate; thus, the results of the study can be regarded as valid on the basis of the participants' response rate. For this particular study more than 85% of the questionnaires were returned. It is in this regard that the commitment of the respondents by creating time to become active participants, added value and validity to the study.

### Research Sample

The population for this research included all HEIs with specific reference to the Universities of Technology (UoTs) as they were earmarked to improve and develop their skills and technological aspects and thus enhance their vocational aspects. More importantly, UoTs are characterised by being research informed, rather than research driven where the focus is on strategic and applied research that can be translated into professional practice. This background made an impact on the choice of the sample. It is important to mention that there are 23 public HEIs and they are divided as follows: 11 Traditional Universities; 6 Comprehensive Universities; and 6 Universities of Technology.

The sample of respondents within the UoTs were further broken as follows for participation either in the interviews or the questionnaires. The participants were chosen from as wide a variety of backgrounds as possible. The universities had a different cultural background with HDI and HAI as the target for the study.

The sample was suitable and regarded as feasible, since, small-sample statistics assure the researcher of acceptable reliability. It should be borne in mind that statistically significant findings for any relevant variable appear, simply by increasing the sample size towards the universal.

### Questionnaires and Interviews

A questionnaire is a series of questions asked to individuals in order to obtain statistically useful information about a given topic. When a questionnaire is properly constructed and re-

sponsibly administered, questionnaires become a vital instrument through which statements can be made about specific groups, or people, or entire populations (Webster's 2008: 1). A total of 50 copies of the questionnaire were distributed among the HODs and QAM.

Data for this study were also collected through the use of interviews. The interview was used to obtain answers to the questions regarding self-evaluation results in terms of quality systems at the participating institutions.

## RESULTS

The qualitative analysis also measured the availability of the QMS in their respective HEIs, and aimed to establish if they were actually effective. This is how the HODs responded.

Forty-five respondents were surveyed for this particular study with HODs and QAM comprising the team of HE experts. This process, according to the respondents, was a 'coming together', as previously it was difficult for HODs to talk openly about QMS issues. It was in this rapprochement that HODs felt their job profile has shifted to the direction of quality compliance as compared to their administrative roles and responsibilities.

Interestingly, most of the HODs expressed their satisfaction with and acceptance of the QMS; according to one respondent, it was of a high standard as she said: "we have more QMS policies that we can work from". Another said: "It is clear, easy to understand and to follow". Nevertheless, some respondents felt that there is no direction at all but did not rule out the possibility of getting assistance, as they struggled to work with what is available. Unfortunately, this does not necessarily suggest a particular problem regarding QMS for HEIs, but presents a true picture of what the deep-rooted challenges are that face these institutions. The analysis is as follows: 29 (64%) of respondents replied that there is QMS in place in their department and institution; 13 (28%) of respondents stated that it was not available; while 3 (8%) did not respond to the question. It is worth noting that even after more than five years since the introduction of HEQC, some institutions are still struggling to introduce formal procedures to guide and manage quality.

Stensaker's (2007: 17) findings show that the external quality mechanism (Re-accreditation) is not solely able to transform HE; its results have not been very positive with respect to quality improvement. However, Stensaker also noted that a number of studies have indicated that the institutional self-evaluation process, taken as part of an external process has been perceived as useful. Nevertheless, this can be achieved only if the internal leadership takes responsibility for mediating between various interests.

In view of Stensaker findings, the researcher views the possibility of including this question as a viable one, based on the fact that HE is a political issue and the fragmentation of the HE lobby is now into different organisational interests. The purpose was to establish the appropriate context of self-evaluation on which HEIs based their internal mechanisms. These questions were included after a lengthy debate and justification by the researcher, since most HEIs claim that quality has always been embedded within the operational aspects of the institution. This traditional notion has not always been visible and justifiable during qualitative analysis, as most respondents could not access the operational aspect processes. Therefore, it was not evident during the researcher's visit if such processes, known as the operational aspect, in fact existed within the institutional structures. From a total of 100% of respondents surveyed, 64% responded by saying that internal quality assurance is implemented successfully in their respective institutions.

The point enhanced by the policy issues is the tensions within the policy-making process between the state and the quasi-state, with no clear boundary between their respective spheres of authority, accompanied by the realisation that both may have different interpretations of what constitutes desirable policy outcomes. The researcher explained to the respondents that they should bear in mind that the evolution of the policy-making process by their respective institutions is not simply a record of expanding institutional powers. This tension between institutional policy and government policies was bound to happen, as experienced by the respondents. It can be argued that the governance of QA raises important issues with regard to leadership.

The analysis of the submissions indicates that 42 (93%) of the institutions had some sort of policy on QA. However, in most cases these policies have not yet been translated into plans and strategies. There was not much available documentation, such as manuals or regulations, reflecting QA arrangements.

Irrespective of how policy-makers within the institution, as well as institutional leaders may decide to shift and place the focus on policy implementation and its discourse and practice; critical questions pertinent to the relevance and academic worth of the institution and its learning programme, will always engage quality scrutiny and enquiry into issues pertaining to the public good.

The researcher felt that it was very important to find the viewpoint of the respondents regarding quality measurements. It has been mentioned from the outset that the study comprises 45 participants; 42 (93%) believed that quality cannot be measured while 3 (7%) differed from the rest and believe that quality is measurable and can be determined by, among other things, a students' satisfaction survey.

## DISCUSSION

In the discussions with respondents, some had knowledge of the guiding principles informing the performance of self-evaluation at their respective UoTs. This tendency did have some positive views, but only marginally so. Many respondents seemed to be ill-informed about the process of self-evaluation leading to programme re-accreditation; the gist of self-evaluation being not evident from the participants' responses. Consequently, a major task still lies ahead in establishing a quality model that can serve as benchmark for UoTs to develop their systems.

The rationale and the logic of the findings have indicated that a clear directive and purpose in performing a self-evaluation task plays a crucial role in making the process more effective. However, in the current system, there is a need to enhance clarity through training and collaboration. Furthermore, the study demonstrates that all HODs should possess knowledge and understanding of the purpose of self-evaluation if the whole process is to be effective. The purposes inform the HODs of what the benefits are and how the process should be unfolded from the beginning to the end. Under-

standing the process will play a major role in assisting HODs' familiarity with the benefits of the system. If HODs understand the process of self-evaluation, how it works and understand its logistics, they are bound to embrace ownership of the process and the concomitant quality culture within the institution.

Continuous improvement does enhance the process of quality, most of the respondents maintained. A fact which should not be ignored is that continuous improvement within the university is supported and strengthened by the pillars of accountability and the confrontation of challenging concepts. It is important to highlight that the pragmatic approach being used in this process balances the two approaches that is accountability and continuous improvement in a more collective and enhancing manner.

#### CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY

It is hoped that this study has helped to provide relevant information that can be used to assist UoTs to support, change or build a QA model that would be of great value to the institution. In addition, the study attempted to address issues or elements that can build a strong quality model; for example the examination section, infrastructures and resources not excluding human capital. The study went further to outline policy implications that could enhance the quality mechanisms of any UoT. Furthermore, the issue of compliance was the contestation of territory between UoTs and the DoE, particularly the HEQC as a permanent structure. Although we can agree with or contest the idea of political interference, it is important to realise that this presents a paradigm shift in the understanding of what quality actually means to us; that is, the culture of accountability and compliance with national imperatives. It is in this regard that the study outlined the national HE DoE structure in order to assist UoTs with compliance issues and to emphasise that strong institutional policies be built on, together with a monitoring process to ensure compliance. Institutional self-evaluation principles are in actual fact very simple, indicating that QA is evidenced-based and that logic is an active force in making it a success. It is recommended that clearly defined concepts linked together to form

a coherent system should be employed to build a strong self-evaluation report. This system makes the results more valid as prior planning is undertaken accordingly.

It cannot be sufficiently emphasised that concepts, ideas and issues should be constantly revised and rethought. Deep historical wounds will not be healed by simply inviting people to come together to engage in dialogue in order to build a self-evaluation report. Renegotiating requires attempting to understand concepts and one another at the so-called 'metaphysical' level. This implies that a workshop be conducted prior to the completion of the self-evaluation process and can be done by the unit of academic development or various faculty structures. The self-evaluation process needs to be exposed when it is dysfunctional and needs to be transformed when it demonstrates limitations. Moreover, where necessary, it should renegotiate relations between HODs from different disciplines who come to the table of discussion with different 'metaphysics'.

In the quest for modernity, HEIs should invest much time in the preparation of self-evaluation and it is important that all staff at HEIs be vigilant and confident enough to complain if the system does not work. HODs should help to foster a climate of confidence in the process of self-evaluation and the institution itself, should be continuously scrutinising the strengths and weaknesses of the system in order to keep on improving.

It is also proposed that the findings of the self-evaluation process be used to benchmark faculties, and departments at HEIs, but also that HE be benchmarked with other quality models worldwide to share best practices.

The findings of this study have confirmed and affirmed the importance of institutional self-evaluation in building and enhancing a quality culture within UoTs. Coming up with a prescriptive model would be a serious misjudgement as quality indicators are based on different principles in various institutions. In supporting the model process the research has not proposed any particular model so that academics will not feel bound to a structure coming from certain legislative requirements as part of the HEQC criteria that serve as a blueprint for any quality matters at HEIs.

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