

The SERTEC Legacy: Quality Assurance Practices Perceived to be Most Effective in Former Technikons?

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ABSTRACT Over the past decades the context in which higher education 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. The study aimed to (a) identify key structures and best practices within internal quality assurance mechanisms used by the surveyed institutions, consequently, gaining a good understanding of what needed to be done in the institutions to promote and assure quality. The study made use of a survey research designs and support it with the qualitative approach. All academic heads of departments and quality assurance section, in this study referred to as Quality Assurance Managers in the four participating institutions, constituted the research sample. The study, therefore, looked at the state of readiness of these institutions as a result of their self evaluation as well as the process and procedures used in developing self evaluation. The thesis of the study was that Universities of Technology would exhibit a good state of readiness for the Higher Education Quality Committee by way of established a well developed self evaluation which is prepared by a team of academics.

INTRODUCTION

Although the South African higher education (HE) system, as a whole, did not have a systematic and comprehensive system of quality assurance (QA), the technikon sector (now referred to as Universities of Technology) had a system of external quality assurance (QA) in place from 1986. In the main, this took the form of some professional Councils engaged in periodic QA in relation to professional programmes and qualifications as per Council on higher education (CHE) regulation (CHE 2004: 143). As the council on higher education (CHE) further points out:

Approaches to quality differed between the university and the technikon sectors. In the university sector, the University Technikons Advisory Council (AUT) was responsible for the offering of new programmes by universities, and it used the criteria laid down in the NATED-02-116 to consider the structure and content of new programmes, as well as the suitability of the applying university to offer them. In practice, it tended to treat each university as a certification or QA body in its own right, as was in line with the growing autonomy which universities has achieved in apartheid years.

The situation with regard to the technikon sector (Universities of Technology) was appreciably different, both in structure and intent. The Certification Council for Technikon Education (SERTEC) came into existence by way of an Act of parliament (Act 88 of 1986) to:

ensure equal standards and to certify on that basis ... Furthermore, the SERTEC council had developed a view of the body's role as a quality monitoring one in addition to certification, focusing on programme accreditation via broad peer group evaluation and employing minimum, rather than equal, standards to satisfy employers and professional bodies (CHE 2004: 144).

This additional mandate was duly formalised by way of the Certification Council for Technikon Amendment Act of 1993 (Act 185 of 1993), which extended the functions of SERTEC to that of an accreditation body for both technikons and agricultural colleges. It was at this point in the life of SERTEC that it:

extended its focus beyond regulations and conditions for examinations, to include issues such as requirements for resource centres, staff qualifications, course content, research and institutional aims, goals and objectives ... [and began) to question the need for external QA in

their sector, particularly given the absence of any equivalent in the university sector (CHE 2004: 144).

It is in view of this background that this study sought to find out the extent to which Universities of Technology were already established, in terms of an enabling infrastructure to enhance QA. Such a state of readiness would enable these institutions to easily accommodate the incoming higher education quality committee (HEQC) modalities which, broadly speaking, signalled requirements similar to those earlier spelled out by SERTEC – such as the adequacy of teaching / learning resources and facilities, staff qualifications, course content, research productivity, the fitness of and of purpose with regard to institutional aims, goals and strategic objectives. Within the aegis of institutional audits and programme reviews, the higher education quality committee (HEQC) was also calling for self-evaluation reports as a critical step in QA. According to Mammen (2003: 57), self-evaluation is the cornerstone of internal quality management (IQA). South African HEI's are required to prepare and submit satisfactory self-evaluation reports as part of the process of programme re-accreditations or reviews. Oosthuizen (2003:54) further argues that most universities in South Africa have established cyclical evaluation processes which are integral to quality assurance. As Oosthuizen (2003:54) observed "the heart of the process is self-evaluation."

The predominant view is that self-evaluation must be developmental and improvement-orientated. Verkleij (2001: 58-90) indicates that if the content of a self-evaluation report is set by the national agenda, instead of the institution's own agenda, this may lead to the neglect of topics that are more urgent or relevant for the institution in favour of the ones incorporated in the national system. This may limit self-evaluation within the institution. Mammen (2003:58) argues that self-evaluation and self-assessment in the university's activities, need to focus on the most important purposes of a university: teaching, learning and assessment of students' performance. Mammen's views support those of Brennan et al. (1995:5) who earlier contended that self-evaluation was a mechanism that certified whether or not the university had achieved its educational objectives.

According to Woodhouse (2001:23), "meaningful institutional self-evaluation assess-

ment depends on openness, truthfulness and risk taking if problems are to be identified and solved." It is equally important that institutions which are considering quality seriously, should have ownership of the system and be committed to reflect, not only critically but also cyclically on their performance (Frazier 1997:11). Furthermore, self-evaluation must be viewed as a comprehensive, systematic and regular review of an organisation's activities and results, referenced against the institutional quality policy. The self-evaluation process allows the organisation to identify clearly its strengths and areas in which improvements can be made – thereby culminating in planned improvement actions, which are then monitored.

It's quite clear, therefore, that self-evaluation encourages people to reflect on what they do and, more importantly, to communicate openly with colleagues.

Problem

Accordingly, this paper was set out to critically examine whether there were identifiable best practices in the internal QA mechanisms of former technikons.

Justification of the Problem

This paper report on the legacy left behind (if at all) by SERTEC with regard to quality promotion and assurance amongst former technikons (now Universities of Technology). SERTEC, like the CHE and HEQC, was a legislated body, charged with the responsibility of assisting HEI's (in this case former technikons) to perform at their highest level of quality. Certainly, the advent of another system (CHE/HEQC) to replace the previous one (that is, SERTEC, for Universities of Technology) called for a sober, honest and collected reflection of the achievements of the preceding system. In this regard, the researchers strongly believed that this research would reveal some of the strengths of the SERTEC era, upon which the new system would build, while at the same time desisting from repeating any of the shortcomings of the previous QA dispensation. This was the place and role of the present study. The importance of learning from our previous experiences as we move forward emphasises the value of legacy studies and historical research.

The paper contended that the experience of SERTEC played an important role in reshaping and informing quality assurance in Universities of Technology before the introduction of the HEQC. For Universities of Technology, it was the sole responsibility of SERTEC to ensure that students received quality education. SERTEC provided for this by means of programme re-accreditation of academic offerings. The psychology of this was that through the threat of being de-accredited from offerings certain programmes of study, institutions would do everything possible to ensure that they offered their students the highest quality of education and training.

In this regard, anyone concerned with the antecedents and history of formalised quality promotion and assurance in South African higher education would inevitably start with the contributions of SERTEC. As in most historical research, there are many lessons to be learned from previous experiences, and so it is with regard to SERTEC and its role in shaping the development of former technikons. Certainly, from the quality point of view, it would be important for academics in South Africa to read about the work of SERTEC and its contribution to higher education.

RESEARCH METHODS

This was a historical study, using questionnaires and interviews as the main data / information-collection approaches. Legacy and historical studies ensure that our history and past contributions in specific endeavours of life are remembered, and serve as building blocks for our future. As Hérubel (2008 241) argues:

Historical research and scholarship are predicated upon continual activity and discovery, be it reformulation of previous historiographical concerns, emerging technical discoveries and innovations, or the discovery of new evidence.

It was also envisaged that within the “technikon” sector, one would possibly find the experience and expertise required for driving the new system being introduced (that is, the CHE/HEQC), lying with people who had become accustomed to the ethos and practices of the SERTEC.

The target population were all former technikons in the Republic of South Africa. The research sample comprised six technikons selected on the basis of stratified random sampling

based on the Provinces that had technikons at the time of the study. Stratified sampling was used to ensure appropriate representation across the provinces. All academic heads of departments (HoDs) and people responsible for quality assurance (in this study referred to as Quality Assurance Managers, QAMs) in the 6 participating institutions constituted the research sample.

A researcher-designed questionnaire and an interview schedule were used to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. Overall, the methods of study were designed in such a way as to persuade the respondents to supply the information that would assist the author in addressing the problem outlined above.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A summary of the major findings is presented below under the sub-headings corresponding to the themes of the research objectives.

Key Criteria for Best Practices

The research objective concerned the identification of key structures and criteria in place for best practices within internal quality assurance mechanisms employed by the participating institutions. A number of factors were investigated in this regard, and the findings are presented below.

Translating Institutional Mission Statements into Quality Service Outcomes

The first key question in institutional self evaluation is normally to answer the question as to what the mission of the particular institution is. More specifically, this question endeavours to elicit information concerning the institution’s medium and long-term strategic objectives and the appropriateness of these objectives to the overall developmental trajectory of the institution. Thus, it is a question of how the institution sees itself in its specific response to local, national and international challenges.

This question can be regarded as a central one: its answer defines the organization and the strategic decision-making ethos of the institution. The institution sets itself objectives and works towards achieving those objectives. The main focus in quality management is, therefore, to

ascertain the extent to which the institution has put processes and procedures in place to pursue its own mission and objectives. In this regard, even external quality evaluation is relevant mainly in-so-far-as it assists the institution to further sharpen its mechanisms for attaining a higher level of success in addressing its mission and strategic objectives. As Jacobs (1996: 67) observes, it should be the firm intention of the external quality provider to assist the higher education institutions (HEI's) in developing their internal quality mechanisms, with a view to eventually conducting voluntary quality monitoring by external peers, based on the HEI's mission statement.

An introductory question was included in order to determine how many institutions had a mission statement. According to Strydom (2000: 30), many academics were not aware of their institutions' mission statements or how to translate the institution's mission statement into quality service/output. This added further justification for the researcher to include the question on the mission statement so as to ascertain the extent to which these middle-management officials – charged with the task of promoting and assuring quality, interfaced with their institutions' mission statements. In this study, just over half of the respondents agreed (55%) that their programmes were in line with their institutional mission statements. The respondents believed that it was very important that the programme objectives were linked to the institutional mission statement. They added that the external quality assessor should evaluate the institution according to what was stated in the mission statement.

According to Maharasoa (2001: 59), at the root of expedient-orientated universities lies commitment to fundraising and programme development activities, without an explicit link to the original mission statement. The importance of revisiting the mission statement is further mitigated by Fourie (2000: 28) who suggests that “mission and goals” of the universities should be linked to the institutions' programme offerings. For a large number of HEIs, taking part in this study provided a reason for writing, for the first time in the self-evaluation report, an (unofficial) outline of the university's mission statement, and thus systematically approaching the question of what the institution is trying to do. Those universities that took up the offer of follow-up

interviews had, as a rule, drafted a mission statement in the meantime or reconsidered and revised an existing one. In many cases, the individual university's mission and vision are also established in policies, processes, procedures and regulations, in order to ensure that university programmes are aligned with the institutional missions. It is further suggested that the first round on institutional audits (under the HEQC) should look at financial stability, admissions and student support services, institutional resources and relationships with the constituencies both inside and outside the institution.

Support from the Examination Section

Institutions wish to ensure that they operate an effective system of student assessment. In looking at the best practices, examination issues are the most important item not to be missed. The monitoring of student assessment processes and procedures could improve the quality of marking which, at a later stage, can lead to some best practices if applied appropriately. Accordingly, HEIs need to have in place quality systems for student assessment. Such an efficient and effective examinations system would assist the institution to monitor the drop-out and completion rates, and look at measures to improve the pass rates and ways of alleviating the high drop-out rates, as the case may be. Within the present context of HE in South Africa, this is a very important quality issue. This is also a concern of the South Africa Minister of Education, Mrs N Pandor that most students find it difficult to progress beyond first year studies in HEIs in the country.

The question of managing the external examination processes is an important aspect of student assessment. In this regard, the respondents believed that particular attention needed to be paid to matters such as the selection and appointment of external examiners, the nomination of moderators, contractual arrangements, the role of external examiners, the form of external examiner reports, and the arrangements for the review of external examiner recommendations. In this study, from the total of 25 respondents, 64% believed that their student assessment standards and administration procedures and processes were satisfactory, whereas the remaining 36% did not think so. Furthermore, the respondents also agreed that

the drop-out rate should be monitored. More specifically, 16 (64%) believed that the monitoring the dropout and graduation rates at every HEI was a very important quality indicator. Indeed, academics need to monitor pass rates so as to ensure reasonable programme success. The heads of department (HODs) are responsible for ensuring high throughput rates, which also involved maintaining a good retention rate. The monitoring of the drop-out rates was something that they regarded as a challenging factor, particularly if one paid attention to the higher education quality committee (HEQC) policy on access with success. Most respondents (66%) confirmed that they monitored the drop-out rates as they affected funding and hence, the sustainability of the programmes. On the other hand, 8 (34%) believed that the monitoring of drop-out rates was the responsibility of the support staff. Overall, the monitoring of drop-out rates could be one of the quality assurance strong points for any programme. If drop-out rates were monitored continuously the HODs could look at various ways of bettering the programme. This is one of the important feedbacks in terms of improving the programme offerings.

One way to enhance quality, in so-far-as student assessment is concerned, is having quality administrative procedures and processes. In this regard, the majority of the respondents were quite satisfied with the role of their respective examination sections/divisions. Most, if not all, HODs believed that the role of the examination section was quite visible in their respective institutions. More specifically, Table 1 shows that 67% of the respondents were satisfied with the role played by examiners and moderators. In addition, the same percentage (that is, 67%) believed that the examination section was rendering wonderful services that supported the activities of the academics, while (33%) did not agree with their fellow HODs, arguing that they did not see or obtain enough support from the examination section.

Table 1 presents a summary of the respondents' views regarding the examination process, including examination administration.

The other point that the researcher regarded as a point of discussion was the matter of qualifications of the examiners. In this regard, the researcher felt that, to a certain extent, the qualifications of lecturers (who become examiners at the end of the teaching segment) would influence

the quality of their academic programmes. This question was motivated by the researcher's observations, in some of the HEI's he was associated with, where it appeared that not much thought was given to the qualifications and experience of internal examiners.

Table 1: Respondents' satisfaction with the student assessment process

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Yes (%)</i>	<i>No (%)</i>	<i>Total (%)</i>
Satisfied with the role of examiners and moderators	67	33	100
Student assessment standards and administration procedures and processes are satisfactory	64	36	100
Dropout rates should be closely monitored at my institution	64	36	100
Because pass rates affect the institution's funding profile, we make sure that they are monitored closely	67	33	100
The examination section renders a wonderful support services to academics regarding examinations	67	33	100
Are the persons responsible for the evaluation of students qualified on a higher level than the students evaluated	66	34	100

The findings of this study on this issue was that the majority of the HOD's (66%) believed that they had appointed suitably qualified and competent lecturers as internal examiners, in line with SAQA requirements. The HOD's believed that this matter was adequately addressed initially in the academic planning stage when subjects were allocated to academics. However, 34% of the respondents reported that they did not necessarily take note of the qualifications of the internal examiners when they were appointed. If a person was appointed to teach a certain subject he/she would be appointed to act as examiner for that subject. This raises concern on whether the SAQA requirements were observed in all cases.

Key Structures and Best Practices

- ♦ Starting with the positions held by the Quality Assurance Managers (QAMs), as the main focal point for driving both quality promotion

and quality assurance, most of the respondents reported that they held academic positions before they got appointed to their current positions. However, most of the incumbents' job descriptions spread their tentacles fairly broadly – that is, they combined the responsibilities of QAM with many other responsibilities. Quite commonly, they found themselves dealing with strategic planning issues, academic development, as well as tasks related to organisational development – amongst other responsibilities. Two of the six institutions did not have permanent appointments for QAM.

- ♦ Another critical and strategic structure looked at in the study was that of Head of Department (HoD). Principally owing to the fast-changing HE landscape, one of the findings was that the majority of the HoDs, had less than five years experience in these positions. The relatively short headship experience could have detracted from the entrenchment of the SERTEC legacy.
- ♦ In terms of best practice, there was a perceived direct link between the integrity of the Examinations Unit and the quality of programmes within a given institution. In this regard, the monitoring of student assessment processes and procedures was seen as a key quality indicator – including the selection and appointment of external examiners, the nomination of moderators, the role of external examiners, the form of external examiner reports, and the arrangements for the review of external examiner recommendations.
- ♦ The respondents also agreed that the drop-out and graduation rates needed to be monitored closely as another quality indicator.
- ♦ Administrative staff, within the Departments, were also seen by HoDs as an important quality structure, and 68% believed that they received wonderful support from such staff in their institutions.
- ♦ Although staff development was regarded as a key quality indicator, there was very little evidence, if any, in the participating institutions of policies and well planned practices regarding staff development. A perusal of staff development initiatives from the plans revealed that some of the attempts to initiate staff development had not indeed

taken place. It was also found that since most staff were employed on a part-time or contract basis, there was very little or no expectation, on their part, for development.

CONCLUSION

The above findings suggest that, generally, the former technikons had enabling QA infrastructures and environments for them to easily accommodate the incoming CHE / HEQC QA regime. However, some of the participating institutions were still grappling with the basics, such appointment of dedicated staff to promote and monitor QA, and others. A robust movement of staff across the now integrated HE system, with a fair number of academic staff moving from the university sector to the technikon sector inevitably led to a degree of loss of the ethos and essence of technikon education – including its SERTEC tradition. It is possible therefore, that these movements may have diluted, to some degree, the strength of the SERTEC legacy in at least some of the participating institutions.

This study aimed to (a) identify key structures and best practices within internal quality assurance mechanisms used by South Africa's Universities of Technology. The findings has presented and discussed the major findings of the study with regard to this research problem.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations flowing out of the major findings of this study are given below:

- ♦ The issue of departments and faculties expressing lack of knowledge regarding the translation of Vision and Mission statements into programme activities is a case in point.
- ♦ The substantive appointments of QAMs, on a fulltime basis, is no longer "a nice to have", but a necessity. The HEQC is heading towards institutional self-regulation regarding quality. This requires that all institutions have on their permanent, full-time staff compliment, people whose responsibility is to continually promote and quality-assure all aspects of the university business. Appointing people on a 'time-share' basis (that is, having the same individual performing many other tasks, concurrently), as was found to be the case in some institutions, will not satisfy the quality requirements of HEIs.

Support structures, such as examination offices, need to be strengthened and mandated to uphold assessment policies, processes and procedures of institutions. In this study, there was a universal acknowledgement of the importance of staff development as one activity that would enhance quality of programmes. However, the study revealed the absence of properly developed staff development programmes as a major weakness in all the participating institutions. This study is obliged to call upon all HEIs to treat this matter with the seriousness it deserves – and with a sense of urgency.

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