

## What Were the Strong and Weak Points Emanating from the Management of Quality Assurance in the Former Technikons?

Jacob Selesho

*School of Teacher Education, Central University of Technology, Private Bag X 20539,  
Bloemfontein, South Africa  
Telephone: +27837285598, +2751 507 3364;  
E-mail: jselesho@cut.ac.za,*

**KEYWORDS** Quality Assurance. Quality Improvement. Programme Reviews. Accountability. Transformation

**ABSTRACT** The notion of quality is as old as the university itself and, to-date, all universities aver to be exercising quality in some form or other. However, in reality, most universities demonstrate aspects of good practice in some sections, but it is quite difficult to practise them across the entire institution. The study sets out to explore whether internal quality assurance provided these institutions with insights pertaining to their strong and weak points and, consequently, gaining a good understanding of what is needed to be done in the institutions to promote and assure quality. The paper did use historical research that focuses exclusively on the past with regard to quality assurance at universities of technology. The target population were all Universities of Technology in the Republic of South Africa. The study decided to select a sample of six Quality Assurance Managers from Universities of Technology selected on the basis of random sampling based on Provincial representations. An interview was used as the main data collection instrument. The study reveals that, in some universities little was done in promoting Quality Assurance. The researcher learnt of institutions' intentions and their current initiatives to align their missions with the needs of the region. Nevertheless, after interviewing the quality assurance manager of an institution, the researcher concluded that the awareness of the Missions and their implications for the three core functions was not consistent throughout the institution. Overall, there was ongoing attention given to promoting, supporting and understanding the Mission, in each institution, and its realisation in the core areas of teaching and learning, research and community engagement.

### INTRODUCTION

The notion of quality is as old as the university itself. In all university activities a claim is made that they exercise quality in some form or other. However, what are seen as critically important are the policies to align the whole university community to have a clear and common understanding of quality, and striving to achieve it in unison. On the other hand, in reality, most universities demonstrate aspects of good practice in some sections, but it is quite difficult to practise them across the entire institution (Hoecht 2006: 28).

Higher Education Institutions (HEI's) in many countries have taken up the challenges of assuring quality through, inter alia, promoting accountability and improving performance. In South Africa, policy documents were developed by the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) (1996) to respond to the challenges facing HEI's. 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

HEI's. In this whole process, internal self-evaluation would form the basis of QA (Vroei-jenstijn 2001: 70-71; Kells 1999: 216-218).

Accordingly, if HEI's do not adequately prepare their students to fulfil various economic and social roles in society, their value is lost. Society expects HEI's to produce individuals who are competent enough to enter the various occupations and professions requiring higher level skills and competences. Thus, all educational programmes should be fundamental to the growth and development of nations (Council on higher education (CHE) 2003).

Institutional quality ranged from traditional, collegial and unsystematic procedures to strategically managed, policy-driven, centrally coordinated systems, which were beginning to become involved with a range of external stakeholders (Henard 2007: 16). However, not one institution claimed to have a fully functioning system, and some institutions appeared to have done no more than to think about quality assurance.

While the overall responsibility for quality within an institution normally rests with the

executives of the institution, it has also been proved beyond doubt that the best outcomes in maintaining and improving quality are obtained when the responsibility for quality is spread as widely as possible through a cascading process of an internal self-evaluation framework. Viewed in this way, internal self-evaluation as the process undertaken by members of all units, faculties and schools within an institution to reflect on their expectations, activities and intentions, plays a critical role in the QA process.

It's on the strength of the scenario set out above under the introduction and the background – and in recognition of the Universities of Technology's experiences under the Certification Council for Technikon Education (SERTEC) QA framework, that the problem for this study was based on the following thesis statement: existing QA practices were seen to be effective in assisting the participating institutions (former technikons) to develop improvement plans and follow through with the necessary implementation program.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

As a legacy study, this research followed a historical research paradigm. Fraenkel and Wallen (2006) point out that the unique characteristic of historical research is that it focuses exclusively on the past. Consequently, they see the main advantage of historical research as permitting the investigation of topics that could be studied in no other way – thereby giving historical research a unique place and special importance in the intellectual pursuit of “the truth”. Historical research is the only research method that can study evidence from the past. Regarding its purpose, Imenda and Muyangwa (2006: 30) see the object of historical research as “to put together a systematic account of events that have already taken place using whatever information may be available”. They posit further that such an account may subsequently be used directly to inform current positions or understandings.

In the present study, the focus was on the second strategy above, that is, ‘interpretation of contrasting events’ – in particular, looking at the performance of institutions against the SERTEC legislation and their expected performance with regard to quality. Concerning sources of information for historical investigations, Deflem

(2000: 3) puts it succinctly by stating that “the past is present through the traces it left behind. These form the sources of historical investigations, also called historical material, documentary evidence, or historical sources”.

### Population and Sampling

Population is described as the set of elements that the research focuses upon and to which the results obtained by testing a sample should be generalised (Bless and Higson-Smith 1995: 87). The population of this study were all the Universities of Technology (former Technikons) in the Republic of South Africa. For this study, stratified random sampling was used, in terms of which 6 (out of a total of 15) “technikons” were selected. As Imenda and Muyangwa (2006: 103) observe, “in stratified random sampling, the proportion of subjects randomly selected from each group is usually the same as the proportion of that group in the target population. As such, the rest of the selections were proportionately based on this unit.

### Instrumentation

The interview was used to obtain answers to the questions regarding self-evaluation results in terms of quality systems at the participating institutions. This interview was conducted with six Quality Assurance Manager (QAM).

## OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the researcher presents the findings related to the three research objectives guiding this study.

### Dedicated Officials for Quality Assurance

This objective was concerned with whether or not the participating institutions had officers appointed to deal specifically with quality promotion and assurance matters in their respective institutions. To address this matter, semi-structured interview protocols were designed and developed for QAMs (that is, Quality Assurance Managers – a term loosely used in the study to refer to any official designated to handle QA matters on behalf of the institution). A personal telephone call was made to the six QAMs in the participating institutions and e-

mails were also sent as a follow up to the telephone conversations. Table 1 presents the years of experiences of the candidates interviewed in various universities. The table also shows the number of years of experience of the respondents in HEI's.

**Table 1: Schedule of interview with QAM of the six universities**

<i>Respondent</i>	<i>Years of service</i>
Respondent A	11
Respondent B	3
Respondent C	14
Respondent D	6
Respondent E	5
Respondent F	3

The QAMs disclosed varying periods of employment in their current positions. It was clear that the participating universities strove to allocate the responsibility of assuring quality to professionals who commanded some kind of experience in a similar or related position.

The content of the interviews was arranged according to different aspects relating to quality matters at the institutions and according to the research objectives. These included institutional quality processes, frameworks of conducting programme self-evaluation, quality assurance policies and promotion of a quality culture. The responses obtained are given below. Overall, therefore, the questions for the interview were structured in order to bring some consistency to all the respondents. Firstly, respondents were asked for certain personal details: gender, years of experience and post levels. Secondly, respondents were asked to indicate whether they had any internal quality structures in their respective departments/schools and also whether they had any experience of programme evaluation/re-accreditation.

In one interview the QAM refused to avail certain information for confidentiality purposes. A personal interview was arranged with each QAM in order to supplement the information supplied in the questionnaires. It was important to obtain some orientation regarding the procedures that were used by the HEIs to improve and implement QA mechanisms at their respective universities.

The actual interview sessions with QAMs started with the respondents' personal profiles. This included the respondents' position as well as the duties attendant to their positions. The

profiles assisted the researcher to, amongst other things; establish the respondents' previous occupation and also its relation to QA matters. This information was also meant to enable the researcher to ascertain the potential wealth of background knowledge and experience which the QAM brought into the interviews.

Overall, the QAMs disclosed varying periods of office in their current positions. On average, the six interviewees had been serving as the QAM's of their universities for more than four years. Most, if not all of them, were holding academic positions as lecturers and academics before shifting to a quality assurance department. Some of the respondents had been in those positions for at least more than enough time to provide a solid grounding for what was required in these positions. The information gained from all the respondents was vital for the researcher; among others, it would inform the researcher about certain developments in the field of QA and also assist in formulating questions for further clarification.

Overall, as QAMs the respondents were highly influential individuals in their respective institutions. Furthermore, they were the people that drove the whole self-evaluation process for their respective universities. Therefore, their input was vital to this study. Most of the QAMs indicated that their position profile went beyond the scope of QAMs. The concerned individuals reported that they combined the responsibilities of the QAM with other responsibilities. In one institution the responsibilities of the institutional planner were also linked to quality matters, while other technikons had dumped the responsibility of QA on the Academic Development Unit. Accordingly, the actual work profiles of the QAMs ranged from strategic planning to academic development as well as organizational development. The quality issues were still relevant to their previous positions as it was their responsibility as lecturers to observe and implement institutional quality matters. Two institutions did not have a permanent person who occupied the position of QAM.

Out of interest, but within the aegis of this study, the researcher decided to hold some discussions with two visiting university administrators as one of cross-checking the South African experience against what was happening elsewhere. One of these visiting senior HEI's managers was a Pro-Vice Chancellor of the Indiana

Purdue State University in America, while the other one was Prof Lee Harvey from Sheffield Hallem University. The Pro-Vice Chancellor indicated that the state supervision of how well institutions should be held accountable would be done by means of accreditation; therefore the first step in accreditation was self-evaluation. The Pro-Vice Chancellor furthermore, indicated that this process was an international pattern on how the governments tried to protect its interests. On his part, Prof Lee Harvey was also quite informative on how British universities approached QA issues. More specifically, he advised HEI's institutions in South Africa to seriously look at what was happening, not only in Great Britain, but also elsewhere – and take a leaf from the QA policies and practices taking place there. This way, according to Prof Harvey, we would move fast on the QA road without repeating the mistakes of those who had already walked this road. He even went further and added that ignoring what happened in Europe and elsewhere, may in time turn out to be a serious judgment error. ‘‘More importantly’’, he said, ‘‘SA should benchmark against what the Europeans have done’’. Issues were still emerging beyond the interview and some of these involved the Human Resource and other services within the universities.

### **Quality Assurance at the Institutional Level**

In presenting the findings with regard to QA matters at the institutional level, the observations made are presented below, taking each institution at a time.

#### ***Institution 1 (Respondent A)***

Respondent A made it clear that there was no common ground for QA in his/her institution, as there were no clear guidelines and procedures on how quality should be observed and applied at his university. S/he said:

*This poses some serious challenges as there are no guiding mechanisms at all at this institution.*

The respondent further elaborated by indicating that his job profile was to look more on the strategic side of the university's business. To show how serious this really was, he indicated that the Quality Management portfolio was just dumped at his/her doorstep, as the Deputy Vice-

chancellor (DVC): Academic felt that it fitted in perfectly with the Institutional Planning Unit.

Respondent A went further and stated as follows:

*The whole matter of QA is very complicated in our institution. There was a lady, who used to have a special interest in quality matters as she was doing her PhD in QA. Although the lady was the head of department (HOD): Secretarial Studies, all quality matters were allocated to her department. When the lady resigned to join the provincial government, the DVC: Academic dumped the responsibility of the QA office in my office. My responsibility as the institutional planner should be to look at the planning side of the university. I have been carrying the responsibility of QA office for the past 5 years. There has been a promise that a new director will be appointed up to today nothing is forthcoming. As I have to revamp this office, I find that lack of organization is the major problem.*

Respondent A advised that while the university did not do enough to improve the way quality matters should be treated, it was crucial that organisations such as SERTEC could have done more to assist the institution as a whole rather than ‘‘be short sighted in looking only at specific programmes without really dealing with quality matters holistically at the institutions.’’ Respondent A further stated that at his/her institution, there were some loopholes emerging from the fact that programme managers or coordinators were left on their own and were given responsibilities to drive their own quality without clear guidelines from the top structure.

Indeed, this may as well be a clear illustration of the tension that was discussed in chapter two between the concepts of accountability versus improvement, in terms of which the CHE (2000: 35) observed that it was ‘‘undeniable to us that SERTEC placed most of its emphasis upon accountability while the quality promotion unit (QPU) emphasized improvement.’’ With specific reference to the work of SERTEC the CHE was of the following view:

*SERTEC had statutory responsibilities which it appears to have discharged well. In so doing, it enhanced the status of the technikon, increased their autonomy, enabled them to award degrees, and provided greater opportunity for student mobility between individual technikons. SERTEC has been successful in gaining legitimacy and ownership for its work within the*

*technikon sector. The principle of programme accreditation has been accepted within the sector and found to be valuable. With an independent Council and with regulations and procedures which provided transparency and a strong professional/employer input, SERTEC ensured accountability for the quality and standards of work in the technikons.*

However, methodologically, the CHE had some reservations, which they expressed as follows:

*The methods adopted by SERTEC, while possibly appropriate to the needs and circumstances of the technikons at the time, appear to us to have been overly mechanistic and unlikely to encourage the development of strong and confident institutional quality management systems (CHE 2004: 36).*

It was the further view of the CHE that the SERTEC notion of self-evaluation – although involved the collection of vast amounts of information, showed “little or no critical evaluation was required from the institutions nor provided by them.” In big measure, this is what Respondent A was remarking about above.

According to the above CHE report, although the self-evaluation reports were expected to be self-critical, the somewhat cumbersome SERTEC manual was seen as the very instrument that encouraged this mechanistic approach to quality issues. By focusing at programme level, the SERTEC approach did not encourage a holistic institutional conception of quality improvement. The view, therefore, was that much as improvements to the quality of education undoubtedly took place, these were more in the nature of spin-offs from the accreditation process rather than its principal intention. It’s for this reason that the CHE report further posited as follows:

*When institution-wide evaluation procedures were introduced in 1991, their selective focus - while undoubtedly of potential value in its own right - did not fit a wider notion of comprehensive institutional audit. As a result of these characteristics of the SERTEC system, the primary response from the institutions seems to have been one of compliance. This is not intended to imply that the SERTEC processes lacked value or effectiveness. But they represented an approach to quality which ultimately saw it as being achieved by the enforcement of externally set rules and regulations (CHE 2004: 36).*

So, in their overall assessment, the CHE (2004: 29) was of the view that although there appeared

to be a general “awareness of and commitment to quality assurance processes at most institutions” visited, “there was often no clear definition or grasp of the notion of quality demonstrated. Mission statements were generally well articulated, but there was a lack of corresponding goals and objectives with strategies to achieve them. In most instances this indicated a lack of staff and resources dedicated to the process, and insufficient assumption of responsibility for quality issues throughout the institution.”

### ***Institution 2 (Respondent B)***

Respondent B admitted that his appointment was very strategic as it was just prior to the SERTEC audit/External evaluation. It was evident that the office of the QAM had a clear mandate of what was expected from that office. Respondent B further affirmed that his/her university had been working hard to design and draft policies relating to QA.

### ***Institution 3 (Respondents C)***

According to Respondent C, Institution 3 was still struggling to get off the ground on many QA matters. The Respondent reported that there were still no clear policies and guidelines to drive the QA process in the institution, and s/he had just been appointed as a QAM. S/he had the following to say:

*The University has not done enough in terms of quality matters. It is crucial that our university should really take the quality matter seriously. This will be the priority of my office to draw some policies and guidelines relating to quality matters. Once in place, such policies and guidelines will prepare the university to respond positively in preparing for the HEQC, now that the SERTEC era is over. However, there seems to be a lack of cooperation and common understanding among the university community. I was recently appointed in this position after a long study leave. Previously, I was a senior lecturer in the department of accounting. I took a study leave to pursue Master’s in Business Administration (MBA) upon my return to the institution, the QAM position was advertised. As I felt that I am no longer growing as a lecturer, I applied for the job and my application was successful. Upon my arrival at QA office there was nothing available, no policy, no guidelines*

*and the worst part was that academics were not aware of the responsibility attached to this office, especially in terms of benefiting from the office. The office was not well positioned in terms of its mandate. There was no common ground on the university approach towards specific tasks relating to QA. When I read the previous self-evaluation reports it was clear that they were compiled without the consultation and support from the QA office. My personal feeling was that all these were done for accreditation purposes only, without development and improvements in mind.*

It is clear from the sentiments of Respondent C that although there were mechanisms for QA in his/her institution, (which most probably made it possible for programmes to retain accreditation status) there were no systematic policies, procedures and processes for the institution to address quality issues holistically. In a sense, one may, therefore, conclude that the SERTEC system did not result in the entrenchment of an institutional QA policy framework, and culture, which would have led to a more systemic growth of quality in the institution. It's possible that the institutional QA mechanisms only kicked in when SERTEC time came, with very little QA-related activities talking place in between SERTEC evaluations.

#### ***Institution 4 (Respondent D)***

With regard to Institution 4, Respondent D reported that the institution was well prepared on QA matters, from the time Respondent D was appointed as QAM at the University. The wealth of experience accumulated by the QAM during the process of instilling a quality culture at the university was impressive. To some extent the researcher felt that this university had done more than enough to be commended on the whole aspect of setting the necessary QA structures. The university community was well aware of what had been done in terms of improving the QA policies, processes, procedures and all other mechanisms related to quality at the university. The university was in a position to disclose guiding documents and policy procedures in dealing with QA. However, as respondent D observed:

*Despite the good policies, in terms of how well they had been planned, the real question that still needs to be addressed is the extent to which these policies and guidelines are applicable.*

Overall, however, this institution was well set on QA matters.

#### ***Institution 5 (Respondent E)***

As for Institution 5, the Director for QA was also doing a good job. Policies were in place and the incumbent Director applauded the former Director for doing a lot for the university concerning quality promotion and quality. In this regard, Respondent D has the following to say:

*"The only worry is the implementation of the policy by the academics. I have been in this university for the past 16 years. Well, in this office it is only six years, otherwise I have been a lecturer up to the HOD position. After obtaining my PhD I got the QA position. Due to a recess of SERTEC, I must say thanks as my work schedule has been manageable. Now, I only have to start preparing for the HEQC. I think I should really thank the previous QAM for setting the ground forme. The office was well managed. The position of QAM is a difficult one, you must account to the Registrar about quality of our academic programmes daily. It is a difficult matter as I have to work closely with all the academics."*

In closing, although two of the participating institutions were still grappling with the basics of establishing a clear QA framework in their institutions, generally, there seemed to be a goal for quality which the participating institutions wanted to see themselves gravitating towards. The only concern, however, appeared to be in the placement / location of the QA function within the institutional organogram. In this regard, it was, for instance, worth noting that there were some disparities in terms of the mandates placed upon the QAM at the various universities. In some instances the QAMs were really doing more than expected in terms of aligning the universities' Missions with their quality indicators.

## **CONCLUSION**

The notion of quality is as old as the university itself and, to-date, all universities aver to be exercising quality in some form or other. However, in reality, most universities demonstrate aspects of good practice in some sections, but it is quite difficult to practise them across the entire institution. More specifically, therefore, the aim of this study was to determine whether internal quality assurance provides South Africa's

Universities of Technology with insight pertaining to their strong and weak points and consequently gives these institutions a good start in the formulation of a policy-plan for improvement.

### Insights Gained

- ♦ One valuable comment came from one of the respondents who was quite critical of the SERTEC approach to QA. In the view of this respondent, SERTEC could have contributed more to the QA environment of institutions had it taken a holistic approach of raising the quality standards of the institution as a whole, rather than “be short sighted in looking only at specific programmes.” This is very important point because almost invariably, one will find that the outcomes of a programme review exercise are likely to reflect strengths, weaknesses and other quality attributes and traditions of the institution. In other words, it’s unlikely that one would find a quality programme in an institution which is sub-standard on most indicators of quality.
- ♦ Although there was a common acceptance of the important roles to be played by HoDs, Deans, Heads of School, Programme Heads, etc., there was a lack of clarity regarding what specific roles these officers needed to discharge. The distinctive roles played by these officials in every HEI can no longer ill-defined, as we move forward.

The researcher is, therefore, convinced that both QA practitioners and future researchers will gain valuable insights from the variables so succinctly laid out in this study. From the findings of the empirical part of the study, the researcher wished to identify what may be referred to as the “blind spots” in our quality assurance culture that needed to be brought to light for the considered attention of the country’s HE communities.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

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

### REFERENCES

- Bless C, Higson-Smith C 1995. *Fundamentals in Social Research Methods: An African Perspective*. Lusaka: Juta and Co. Ltd.
- Council on Higher Education 2003. *The State of Private Higher Education in South Africa*. Pretoria: CHE.
- Council on Higher Education 2004. *South Africa HE in the First Decade of Democracy*. Pretoria: CHE.
- Deflem M 2000. On the Methodology of Historical Sociology: Scattered Notes. University of South Carolina, Sloan College, Columbia. From < via www.mathieudeflem.net> (Retrieved on 13 December, 2008).
- Fraenkel JR, Wallen NE 2006. *How to Design and Evaluate Research in Education*. 6<sup>th</sup> Edition. San Francisco: McGraw-Hill Higher Education.
- Henard F 2007. Practice and effects of self-evaluation in the institutional evaluation processes of CNE – A study based on 17 evaluation reports of HE institutions of Ile-de-France. Embedding quality culture in HE. *A Selection of Papers from the 1<sup>st</sup> European Forum for QA*. Technische Universitat Munchen, Germany.
- Hoecht A 2006. QA in UK HE: Issues of trust, control, professional autonomy and accountability. *HE*, 51: 27-35.
- Imenda SN, Muyangwa MM 2006. *Introduction to Research in Education and Behavioural Sciences*. Pretoria: Tshwane University of Technology
- Kells HR 1999. National higher education evaluation system: Methods for analysis and some propositions for the research and policy void. *Higher Education*, 38: 209-232.
- Murdoch N 2004. *A Proposed Framework for Departmental Self-evaluation and Peer Review: The Decade Ahead, Challenges for Quality Assurance in South Africa Higher Education*. Pretoria: CHE.
- National Commission on Higher Education 1996. *A Framework for Transformation, 1996*. Pretoria: HRSC.
- Vroeijestijn T 1995. *Improvement and Accountability: Navigating between Scylla and Charybdis. Guide for External Quality Assessment in Higher Education*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Vroeijestijn T 2001. *How to Assure Quality in Higher Education*. A Joint Publication between Unisa and Technikon S.A.