Guest Editorials

Quality assurance in higher education in South Africa

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There is much acknowledgement that education is the high road to economic productivity, some measure of social equality and democracy in the modern world. The technological explosion of the late twentieth century has made ever higher levels of educational attainment the essential precondition for social, economic, and personal success. Because technology is changing the world so rapidly, it is no longer enough to give young men and women a traditional education, and then assume that what they learn in their early years will sustain them throughout a lifetime of productive work.

Educational institutions world wide are changing in response to these challenges not nearly as fast as corporations are changing, but much faster than they have ever changed before. Larger and larger segments of the population are continuing their educational experiences through secondary school, to the first stage of the tertiary level, and even beyond. The sheer size of the higher educational sector in many countries has prompted the creation or expansion of non traditional forms of educational organisation. Distance learning, often seen as the poor relation of university education, has come into its own, and the old divide between town and gown has been replaced by co operative educational ventures, uniting the universities and technikons with corporations, the public sector and governmental bodies.

The rapid pace of technological change has broken down traditional structures of authority in the work world. Instead of top down hierarchical pyramids of command in factories, one now finds modular group ings of co equal workers, for example, in the new electronics industries. Increasingly, the ability of workers to adapt to new demands, take an active role in innovation, and work well in teams is becoming vital to economic success, taking the place of the older demand that the work force be obedient, punctual, and docile.

Paradoxically, educational institutions were among the most conservative and resistant to change in the modern world, especially at universities, where one might have expected the greatest openness to change. It would be impossible to imagine the Chief Executive Officer of a modern corporation stating complacently that his workers do things just as they were done twenty years ago when he began his rise up the executive ladder. Such was not the case at universities. There were countless distinguished professors and lecturers who were quite comfortable teaching the same courses that they studied, in the same way. It was quite usual for a faculty to be organised into the same departments for decades. Much of this has changed and much more needs to be changed.

The conservative tendency in higher education is a phenomenon peculiar not just to South Africa, but is a world wide phenomenon, and stands as an obstacle to the development of new forms of educational technique and organisation to meet the radically new needs of the modern work world. But the problem is compounded in South Africa by the legacy of its apartheid past (see the Bantu Education Act of 1953 and The Extension of the University Education Act of 1959).

In four fundamental ways, the legacy of apartheid magnified the resistance of the educational establish ment to the changes required by the world of the new millennium.

First, the structure or organisation of higher educa
tional institutions incorporated into the very fabric of South African universities the official policy of separation and inequality that ruled for so long. The physical environment, the resource allocations, the infrastructure of higher education, and admissions criteria among many other factors affecting education, broke down along racial lines which the change of government has only begun to rectify.

Second, generations of discrimination and neglect have left South Africa deprived of the intelligence, creativity, and potential of the great majority of its population. The problem is not merely the grotesque shortage of well trained Black academics, although that is surely a disparity that must somehow be addressed. Rather, the real problem lies in the intellectual content of disciplines that were developed on the pervasive but unacknowledged racism of the now discredited regime. In the humanities, in the social sciences, in law, even in the sciences and technology, what was taught and how it was taught reflected the structure of apartheid. Indeed, because universities and so many of the men and women who work in them are so conservative about their own affairs (however frequently they may claim that they were non-racial and never voted in the apartheid elections), it is extraordinarily difficult to get many of these academics to acknowledge that there is need for change.

Third, the traditions of pedagogy in South Africa were antithetical to the development of strong, independent minded, creative young men and women who can think for themselves. Rote learning, dictatorial discipline, memorisation and regurgitation reinforced the authoritarian tendencies of the apartheid state. Tragically, generations of teachers destined for schools in Black areas were trained in this pedagogy. Some attempts are being made at the national level of a Qualifications Framework, or a Curriculum 2005 or the principle of Outcomes Based Education to address these tendencies.

The fourth, and in many ways the most destructive, legacy of apartheid is a structure of lowered expectations for young people of colour that affected the nation’s higher educational system. Young men and women who speak four or five languages were viewed by too many of their teachers as intellectually incapable of mastering the elements of a modern education. Research has demonstrated that the ability of students to do well is directly related to the expectations of their teachers and of the society in which they live.

For all of these reasons, there is an imperative need for an entirely new attempt at self examination, criticism, and self evaluation in the world of higher education. The time has now come for all of us to put away our natural self satisfaction and conservatism, and in stead struggle with the challenges facing universities in the new millennium and to devise new ways of evaluating our educational programmes and account ing for what we do.

There are massive efforts by government, national and provincial educational bodies, academics, education policy units, and concerned members of the public to address the issues identified above. Much of these efforts come under what is popularly known as the Transformation of Education. That we are in the transition phase is articulated clearly in the April 1996 NCHE Discussion Document: “The present state of South African higher education reflects in many respects the legacy of apartheid which created inequalities, undermined the economy and polarised the society. The transformation of higher education must be located within the broader transition of South Africa to democracy, which has interlocking socio economic, political and educational components.” (A Framework for Transformation: 27).

An essential element in the transformation of education is the development of a quality assurance system in higher education. This relatively new international and national phenomenon has mushroomed into a fast growing industry with a plethora of conferences, publications, exchanges of quality assurance experts, and the creation of Higher Education Quality Com mittees or Agencies. The complexities surrounding the development of quality assurance at the national and institutional level cannot be overestimated. There are new structures to be established and new demands are constantly made on the overworked academic and administrator.

“What is different about the late twentieth century university, as compared with its predecessors, is the growing burden of administrative and management functions. The proliferation of committees, adminis trative bodies, centres, institutes and the like, which seems to have taken over the lives of professionals in corporations, has surfaced in universities as well. It is no longer enough for a university principal to be an academic leader; indeed, management and organisational skills are deemed to be more important than an academic background or even academic standing. Principals, vice principals, deans, and even heads of academic departments are finding that they have less and less time to teach and research and are spending more and more time managing and administering.” (Carpenter, G 1997. The besieged acade, South African Journal of Higher Education 11(2):9).
It is understandable that attempts to institute quality assurance met with and still meets with strong resistance within the educational sector. We have already drawn attention to the fact that many saw quality assurance as an added responsibility and burden to an already over subscribed schedule. There are those who are alarmed at the introduction of business language, metaphors, terminology and methods into their educational world. Then, there are those who see quality assurance as a threat to their academic freedom and autonomy. Yet, the fundamental questions that quality assurance asks all of us to make a part of our continuing work activities are important: What am I trying to do or achieve? Why am I doing it in that way? or What is the context in which I am doing it? How do I know that it is effective and that I am doing a good job? Is this the best possible way of doing it? Was it worth it, after all? And so on.

These are obviously, deceptively simple questions. The point of such questioning is to get everyone involved in thinking about what they are doing. As one of the main ideas of quality assurance is self examination, this type of questioning creates opportunities not only to acknowledge good practices and the sharing of these, but also to document actual and real problems, to acknowledge mistakes made and to attempt to deal with them in creative ways.

It is our view that in these challenging and difficult times, a concerted effort has to be made to somehow strike the best possible balance between improving the quality of education we engage in our teaching and research and accounting to a variety of stake holders. However, one must be ever watchful that efforts at implementing quality assurance do not become narrow, instrumental and bureaucratic. The focus should rather be on advancing the goals of the NQF:

- to create an integrated national framework of learning achievements
- to facilitate access to, and mobility and progression within, education, training and career paths
- to enhance the quality of education and training
- to accelerate the redress of past unfair discrimination in education, training and employment opportunities, and thereby
- to contribute to the full personal development of each learner and the social and economic development of the nation at large.

These are ideals that each educationist should strive towards.

We present to the reader the proceedings of a conference held at Bloemfontein. Professor Kalie Strydom in his Guest Editorial has provided a fine overview of the main themes that were discussed at the conference. We trust that this edition of the conference proceedings will make a significant contribution to the development of quality assurance in South Africa.

We also present to you a Postscript by Piyuschi Kotecha and Kathy Luckett on "The way forward: emerging perspectives on a national quality assurance system for South Africa".