An investigation into the perceptions of academic staff on quality assurance in teaching and learning at selected South African universities

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ABSTRACT
During the last decade South African higher education has undergone various changes in terms of new policies and legislation, an increasing diverse student population, participating governance structures, declining enrolment figures and different modes of programme delivery. Apart from adjusting to these changing circumstances higher education has to compete in a competitive global and national environment where students have a variety of institutions and delivery modes to choose from, although only one pool of potential students exists. In this competitive environment academics are forced to demonstrate the quality of what they are doing and consider the effectiveness thereof. Academics also have different views regarding a quality assurance system. Some view it as a form of managerial control, while others feel such a system can ensure improvement. This study was therefore initiated to investigate how South African academics perceive the implementation of a quality assurance system that is initiated by government.

INTRODUCTION
In a competitive global and national environment higher education institutions in South Africa are faced with declining enrolments, diverse student populations and different modes of delivery. Amidst these concerns institutions are also accountable for quality assurance of their programmes. As a result the institutionalisation of quality assurance is high on the agenda of South Africa and other developing countries throughout the world (CHE 2000:1).

In the policy transformation, which was evident during the past years, proposals were tabled for the establishment of a formal quality assurance system for South African higher education institutions. The National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE 1996) started this process, resulting in the acceptance of the White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education. In this document quality is identified as one of the principles that should guide the transformation of higher education, together with equity and redress, democratisation, development, effectiveness and efficiency, academic freedom, institutional autonomy and public accountability.

These principles are also reflected in the Higher Education Act (Act No 101 of 1997). This Act makes provision for the Council on Higher Education (CHE) to establish a permanent sub committee, the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) with the mandate to:

- Promote quality assurance in higher education;
- Audit the quality assurance mechanisms of higher education institutions; and
- Accredit programmes of higher education.

The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) Act, with its embedded National Qualifications Framework (NQF), should also be viewed as an important development in the enhancement of quality assurance. The mandatory registration of programmes and qualifications with the NQF for subsidy and accreditation purposes, will ensure tertiary educators to reconsider not only the quality of their programmes and curricula, but also to revisit existing teaching practices and the ways students are learning.

The latest development in the quality debate is the establishment of the Interim HEQC by the CHE who will start its operational duties during 2001. According to the founding document of the interim HEQC (CHE 2000:5) the vision of the HEQC is to ensure “...a quality driven higher education system that contributes to socio economic development, social justice and innovative scholarship in South Africa whilst the central objective of the HEQC is to ensure
that providers effectively and efficiently deliver education, training, research and community service which are of high quality and which produce socially useful and enriching knowledge as well as a relevant range of graduate skills and competencies necessary for social and economic progress”.

Despite all the noble intentions of government’s policy initiatives and institutional quality assurance systems, quality is not welcomed, neither understood by all. For some it is “inspection” an attempt of those having the “power” to regulate the work of subordinates. Quality, as generally understood, is a multifaceted phenomenon, which is difficult to define as it is influenced by a variety of factors (Westerheijden 1998; El Khawas 1998; Vroeijenstijn 1997; Akin Aina 1995; Mosha 1997) and takes place on various levels and focuses on various aspects of an institution (Brennan 1996; Cloete 1997; Bergquist 1995; Harman 1997). Harvey (1995) draws our attention to the fact that the determination of quality in higher education is not that easy as there are “no simple, discernible end products in higher education as higher education is an ongoing transformative process that continues to make an impact long after any formal programme of study has been completed” (Harvey 1995).

For the purpose of this study we have focused on one of the core activities of a higher education institution, namely teaching and learning. Our point of departure in defining quality in teaching and learning is based on self evaluation as various experts in this field (eg Kells 1988, 1992; Brennan 1996; Vroeijenstijn 1993, 1995) are of opinion that the effectiveness of a quality assurance system is dependent of internally self driven processes (Hay & Fourie 1999).

### QUALITY ASSURANCE IN TEACHING AND LEARNING

The question that relates to our research applies to which mechanisms and procedures an institution could implement that would enhance the quality of its teaching and learning. Examples of quality assurance mechanisms and procedures that can be applied to teaching and learning could be the following: student admission and selection criteria, internal assessment and examination, external examiners, student development and support, programme planning, staff appointment, staff (peer) appraisal, etc. Concerning quality assurance in teaching and learning Table 1 provides areas for self evaluation, which could enhance the quality of teaching and learning.

#### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Improving the teaching and learning environment (University/faculty/department level)</th>
<th>Improving programmes/Courses</th>
<th>Recognising and rewarding excellence in teaching</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic staff profile analysis</td>
<td>Quality of learning and teaching (eg quality of teaching process; staff student relationships and programme ethos)</td>
<td>Planning and preparing for lecturing (eg lectures have clear outcomes for learning)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff professional activities</td>
<td>Quality and relevance of modules and programmes (eg expert review, including external stakeholders; adhering to criteria of quality in programme self assessment)</td>
<td>Process of teaching (eg explanations and questions are clear and at appropriate level)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff development (eg participation in seminars and courses)</td>
<td>Student progress and achievement (eg quality of learning outcomes; responsiveness to particular needs)</td>
<td>Assessment of students and their learning outcomes (eg students obtain high quality, regular feedback on their progress and a formative assessment approach)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty management: leadership and planning (eg effectiveness of Dean’s leadership in shaping the learning and teaching environment)</td>
<td>Management for excellence in teaching and learning: leadership and planning (eg effectiveness of academic leadership in promoting successful learning and teaching)</td>
<td>Evaluating and improving teaching (eg information from assessment used to modify teaching)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What we gather from this information is that the quality of teaching and learning is determined by all three areas identified, namely the creating of an enabling environment for learning, ensuring continuing programme development based on self-evaluation and self-reflective practices whilst rewarding staff and students for excellent performances.

THE INQUIRY

Realising the importance of quality in teaching and learning and what it entails, the researchers were aware of the inequalities that exist in terms of the quality of teaching in the country. Apart from studying literature to determine what quality in teaching and learning constitutes, our mission was to explore the perceptions of academic staff at various South African universities on this issue. From the literature it became clear that if discrepancies exist between stakeholders of the institution, and they do not share the same vision for quality (and neither accept ownership of the quality assurance system), little progress will be made, and subsequently conflict arises. Therefore, the main research question that was formulated for this study was the following: How do academics perceive quality assurance regarding teaching and learning in their institutions? Other subsidiary questions were:

- Do academics see the importance of quality assurance mechanisms and procedures in their teaching and in the ways students learn?
- Do management and academics agree on the ways and approaches applied to ensure quality assurance in their institutions?
- How do academics see their role in the implementation of a quality assurance system for teaching and learning?

Sampling

A total of 380 respondents were selected by way of systematic sampling from the following universities in the Free State and the Eastern Cape: Vista Bloemfontein, Vista Welkom, University of the Free State, University of Qwaqwa, Vista Port Elizabeth, University of Port Elizabeth, University of Fort Hare, Rhodes University and the University of Transkei. In order to obtain the perceptions of all staff levels, a junior lecturer, a lecturer, a senior lecturer, a head of department and a dean from each of the faculties of Arts, Education, Economic Sciences and Science were selected to form part of the sample. 130 questionnaires were returned providing a response rate of 34.1%.

The measuring instrument

A questionnaire was designed to establish academics’ perceptions of quality in teaching and learning. The researchers realised that the measurement of perceptions and attitudes is a thorny issue. A study was made of types of perceptions and attitudes (eg. behavioural, cognitive, psychodynamic and humanistic perceptions). Various instruments measuring perceptions and attitudes were studied (eg. the Thurstone Scale, Likert Scale, Osgood’s Semantic Differential Technique and the Social Distance Scale) (Oppenheim 1998; Herriot 1976). Respondents were requested to indicate whether their institution had certain quality assurance mechanisms and procedures in place and the importance they attach to it. Open ended questions were used to ensure that all possible information be gathered. A prototype of the questionnaire was developed and evaluated by various (17) higher education practitioners. These practitioners were from South Africa, the United States from America (USA) and Africa. The comments and suggestions made on the prototype were incorporated into the final questionnaire.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Section A of the questionnaire requested respondents to indicate those quality assurance mechanisms and procedures, which they apply in their teaching and learning practices. Eighteen (18) mechanisms and procedures were listed. They were also requested to indicate the importance they attach to these mechanisms and procedures. These responses are given in Table 2.
From Table 2 it is clear that matric results still play an important role (66.0%) as a selection procedure to ensure that entry levels meet quality standards. It seems, however, that the use of standardised tests are used less (33.0%) than matric results to select students. Although various policies propose the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) as a selection criteria, it is used the least (23.0%) by institutions. Internal evaluation still plays an important role as a quality assurance mechanism and procedure as 80.7% of all respondents make use of it. Less than half (46.2%) of the respondents indicated that they have external moderation procedures in place while half (51.5%) make use of external moderation. Students’ results are seen as a most important measurement for quality in teaching and learning (88.5%). According to 73.1% of the respondents no external evaluation of their department is done, while 67.0% said that no departmental self evaluation system at their institution, is in place.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mechanism/Procedure</th>
<th>Yes (%)</th>
<th>No (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Selecting students by means of matric results</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Selecting students by means of standardised tests</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Selecting students by means of recognition of prior learning</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Internal examination</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. External examination</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Internal moderation</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. External moderation</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Providing learning facilitation (eg tutorials to students)</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Providing academic development (bridging) programmes</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Providing regular feedback to students on their progress</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Staff development activities and in service training</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Teaching awards for staff</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Class visits</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Peer assessment</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Student results, eg pass rates</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Student evaluation of teaching</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Departmental self evaluation</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. External evaluation of department</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2
Existing quality assurance mechanisms and procedures in place (N = 130)
In terms of the importance attached to above specified quality assurance mechanisms and procedures, certain deductions could be made. Although internal examination is in place according to 80.7% of respondents, somewhat less (66.1%) importance is attached to it. More importance is attached to external examination (61.5%); external moderation (72.3%) and regular feedback (76.1%) as quality assurance mechanisms, than what has been reported to be in place (46.2%; 51.5% and 53.8% respectively) (see table 2) at the various institutions. Teaching awards for staff is viewed as very important (66.1%) while only 28.5% of respondents said it is in place at their institutions. Although staff may feel that greater importance should be given to this mechanism, it can also be a greater motivator for staff to perform better or to be more accountable. It became evident that both class visits (73.8%) and peer assessment (77.6%) are utilised as quality assurance mechanisms and procedures.

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From the above discussion it was evident that the following quality assurance mechanisms and procedures were assessed as being most important by all academics (by more than 70%):

- External moderation;
- Feedback to students on their progress;
- Staff development; and
- Student results.

The respondents attach high value to students’ evaluation of teaching (74.6%), although in practice this occurs less (61.0%). Departmental self evaluation processes are not used that much (33.0%). It is, however viewed by 62.3% of respondents as very important and by 14.6% as quite important.

External evaluation of departments, although not in practice (26.9%), is viewed as very important by 60.0% of the respondents and as quite important by 20.7%.

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- External moderation;
- Feedback to students on their progress;
- Staff development; and
- Student results.
SECTION B

Section B elicited institutional approaches and attitudes towards quality assurance. In addition, the aim of this section was also to establish the institutions’ notions of quality and to investigate how these institutions are responding to national policy initiatives related to quality assurance of teaching and learning. These findings are documented in table 4.

Table 4
Staff perceptions on quality assurance regarding teaching and learning (N = 130)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STATEMENT</th>
<th>4 I agree to a large extent (%)</th>
<th>3 I agree to a moderate extent (%)</th>
<th>2 I agree to a slight extent (%)</th>
<th>1 I do not at all agree (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. My institution places a high premium on the quality of teaching and learning programmes.</td>
<td>54.6</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The registration of programmes with SAQA and the NQF will enhance the quality of programmes offered at my institution.</td>
<td>36.9</td>
<td>34.6</td>
<td>18.4</td>
<td>10.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I am uncertain about policy requirements regarding the registration of programmes by SAQA.</td>
<td>28.5</td>
<td>41.5</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>12.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Quality in teaching and learning is only possible at elitist higher education institutions.</td>
<td>33.8</td>
<td>30.7</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>19.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. My institution’s notion of quality relates to the enhancement of students’ abilities regardless of their initial level of academic functioning.</td>
<td>30.7</td>
<td>37.6</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>15.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. At my institution management at all levels share the same vision for enhancing the quality of teaching and learning.</td>
<td>21.5</td>
<td>32.3</td>
<td>24.6</td>
<td>21.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Government should not interfere with quality assurance in higher education programmes.</td>
<td>28.5</td>
<td>37.6</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>16.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. The implementation of a quality assurance system for teaching and learning can only succeed when lecturers and students take ownership of the system.</td>
<td>67.6</td>
<td>23.1</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>7.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Quality assurance systems in teaching and learning are essentially a way in which management tries to control academics.</td>
<td>26.2</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>20.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Academic (collegial aims (improvement) and managerial aims (accountability) with regard to quality assurance are incompatible.</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>29.2</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>23.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Academics are disempowered by quality assurance systems for teaching and learning.</td>
<td>30.7</td>
<td>22.3</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>26.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. The demands of professional boards hamper the quality of learning programmes.</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>14.6</td>
<td>54.6</td>
<td>21.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Quality assurance of teaching and learning will result in more uniformity of programmes.</td>
<td>22.3</td>
<td>47.6</td>
<td>16.9</td>
<td>13.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Self evaluation should be the cornerstone of quality assurance of teaching and learning.</td>
<td>49.2</td>
<td>24.6</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>13.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. At my institution the development of learning outcomes is one way of ensuring the quality of teaching and learning.</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>48.5</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>12.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
One would assume that all respondents would have been of the opinion that their institutions place a high premium on the quality of their teaching and learning programmes. However, a small percentage of respondents (3.9%) indicated that they do not agree with such a statement and 11.5% only agreed slightly. It was maintained by 84.6% of the respondents that their institutions do place a high premium on the quality of their teaching and learning programmes.

The majority of respondents agreed that the registration of programmes with SAQA and the NQF will enhance the quality of programmes offered at their institutions whilst more than two thirds of respondents (69.9%) believe that quality assurance of...
teaching and learning will result in more uniformity of programmes. Most respondents (70.0%) felt uncertain about the policy requirements regarding the registration of programmes by SAQA. As academics are getting more experience in this area, this uncertainty will hopefully diminish. It was indicated by 64.5% of respondents that quality in teaching and learning is only possible at elitist higher education institutions this could be a result of the history of the country when perceptions were created that only historically white institutions have quality.

The majority of respondents (66.1%) felt that government should not interfere with quality assurance in higher education programmes. This should be viewed against the tradition of universities and academics' appeal for academic freedom and institutional autonomy. This explains why most respondents (90.7%) share the view that any quality assurance system for teaching and learning can only succeed when lecturers and students take ownership of the system. Although the majority of respondents (73.8%) view self evaluation as a cornerstone for quality in teaching and learning, self reflective practices are not common at institutions as only 35.5% indicated that they utilise this type of practice.

However, a perception exists (53.8%) that a quality assurance system in teaching and learning is essentially a way in which management tries to control academics, while 46.2% disagree with this view. This finding is supported by De Vries (1997) who states that many staff are resistant because to them quality becomes an additional means of securing managerial control. In line with above statement 53% are of opinion that academics are disempowered by quality assurance systems. This clearly indicates the tension that exists between managers and the so called managed (Newton 1999).

Other interesting findings were the following:

- It does not seem as if professional boards are viewed to be hampering factors in the quality of learning programmes as 76.1% do not see it as a drawback for quality.
- Less than half the respondents (46.1%) indicated that staff development is done regularly at their institutions. Due to financial constraints this area is neglected. Financial constraints also caused 71.7% to indicate that they are not sure whether their institutions have sufficient financial resources to ensure that quality teaching and learning takes place.
- It seems that institutions went to great lengths to put an effort in to keep their programmes relevant, making sure they do meet educational demands as 77.7% of respondents indicated that they adjust and change their teaching methods to programme and learning outcomes and content.
- Less than a third (32.4%) indicated that at their institutions, measures are designed to detect learning problems and only 39.2% of respondents reported that measures are designed at their institution to provide guidance, support and follow up sessions to enhance student learning.
- Not all courses are subjected to external moderation as respondents indicated a rather low 25.3%.
- A notion of quality as being excellent and of high standard is adopted by 72.2% of respondents.
- Only 28.3% of respondents agreed that the HEQC should rather focus on programme assessment than on institutional auditing. By implication 71.7% are more in favour of institutional audits as part of quality assurance.

SECTION C

Section C of the questionnaire expected respondents to complete three unfinished sentences regarding quality assurance.

Question 1: The primary purpose of quality assurance for teaching and learning should be ...  

Respondents acknowledge the importance for South African higher education institutions to adhere to international standards and compatibility. Recognition is given to the fact that higher education needs to be in line with global trends, otherwise South Africa might lag behind. Recognition is given to the fact that quality training means employability and it is senseless providing graduates who are not in demand by the workforce, or do not have the necessary skills required from a changing work force. The type of graduate that institutions should deliver is indicated as one with reasoning and problem solving skills. Respondents also referred to the application of knowledge in real world contexts.

Question 2: Regarding the implementation of any quality assurance system for teaching and learning, I would suggest that ...  

This sentence was completed by 95 (74%) respondents. Respondents could provide as much as 3 responses to this question. 220 responses were labeled.
Respondents listed self evaluation as an integral part of, and a prerequisite for, quality assurance, the most (16%). Respondents (10%) suggested that they prefer an improvement driven quality assurance system, free from punitive measurements and one that has been contextualised for the South African higher education system (5%). However, it is also pleaded that any proposed quality assurance system should be free from bureaucracy that might paralyse novel intentions. Regular feedback (8%) from a preferably non governmental quality assurance agency (mentioned by 4%) should be accompanied by adequate and constructive feedback for improvement (8%). The same result was indicated by academics in the findings in section B (66.1% was against governmental interference).

Question 3. My role regarding quality assurance in teaching and learning is to ...

100 (77%) respondents completed this sentence and 222 responses were listed. Respondents were requested not to provide more than 3 options.

Thirty percent (30%) of the respondents do realise that continuous self evaluation, integrated with self reflective practices, is the responsibility of an academic who is serious about quality. Personal accountability and taking ownership of the quality system are regarded by 39 (18%) of the respondents as their roles in implementing a quality assurance system. Respondents who are in managerial positions draw on their roles to embark on staff development activities (5%), to implement policy guidelines regarding quality assurance (3%), to keep departments informed (3%), to be an example for other members of staff (2%) and to be a watchdog (1%).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the research findings the following recommendations are made:

- Academics should explore alternative selection criteria for access at their institutions and investigate the opportunities provided by the recognition of prior learning and experiences. The development of contextualised standardised selection criteria should be explored.
- The development of achievable learning outcomes should be done by all academics.
- Academics should also investigate different ways of both internal and external evaluation practices with guaranteed quality assurance mechanisms and procedures. The role of external/peer/equivalent departments scrutinising each other’s work should be expanded to both undergraduate and postgraduate levels.
- External moderation of subjects should be done at all institutions for all subjects in order to ensure international competitiveness.
- Awareness and knowledge about SAQA’s policy requirements is necessary in order to register all
programmes. A regular visit to SAQA’s website (www.saqa.org) is important for knowledge of the latest developments in the learning areas.

- It is all the stakeholders of an academic institution’s responsibility to ensure that quality assurance mechanisms and procedures are in place.
- Quality assurance mechanisms and procedures found not to be in place, and which should be addressed, are the recognition of prior learning and standardised selection tests, teaching awards for staff, class visits, peer assessment, departmental self evaluations and external evaluation of departments.

CONCLUSION

Senior academic managers responsible for the establishing of institutional quality assurance systems should take cognisance of the sometimes diverse perceptions staff have of quality issues. These perceptions might be conflicting and cause the institution not to make the desired progress. It is extremely important that managers deal with staff perceptions in staff development activities and clarify issues that might hamper staff to take ownership of quality assurance.

Indeed as Meade (1997:3) observes, much depends on effective leadership: “Leaders have a distinctive responsibility for ensuring that... members of the university community experience a climate that promotes a sense of trust, and hence a willingness to engage in change for improvement.”

REFERENCES


