Student involvement and empowerment in quality assurance in distance education in South Africa

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Abstract

This article attempts to explore why and how student involvement is a necessary, but under-developed and under-utilised strategy for enhancing quality distance education in South Africa. Any critical analysis of education in South Africa needs to consider the historical and current social contexts, and in this case the analysis needs to explain the circumstances and social forces responsible for the timing, method and approach in which quality assurance in higher education, and specifically distance higher education in South Africa developed. The article then focuses on why the distance education sector places such a premium on quality assurance and why quality assurance in distance education rely on learner involvement and empowerment as a way of building the new democracy.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to explore why and how student involvement is a necessary, but under-developed and under-utilised strategy for enhancing quality distance education in South Africa. Several social forces of the past, present and future are contextualised to explain the circumstances and routes in which quality assurance in higher education, and specifically distance higher education in South Africa developed. The article then focuses on the premium that quality assurance in distance education places on learner involvement and empowerment as a way of building the new democracy. Lastly, the potential and value of learner involvement and empowerment in terms of democratic ideals are provided.

QUALITY ASSURANCE IN OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING IN SOUTH AFRICA

The rationale and history of quality assurance in higher education in South Africa is well documented (Department of Education 1995; Kistan 1999; Council on Higher Education 2004a; Council on Higher education 2004b).

The transition from apartheid to democracy in South Africa brought about new values, practices and institutions which support majority rule. The debate on change in higher education in South Africa started well in advance of political liberation. Therefore, one the priorities of the democratically elected government
was to restructure and transform higher education to address the fragmented, racially-defined, inequitably funded and elitist nature of the higher education sector. In South Africa, the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) report, the White Paper, and the Higher Education Act should be viewed together in providing for the co-ordination of quality assurance in higher education system. The Council on Higher Education (CHE), and its sub-committee, the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) carry the responsibility for quality assurance in higher education. The quality assurance system has two purposes, namely the public accountability and institutional improvement.

According to Keevey’s (2004) critique of the quality assurance practices associated with the NQF, the legitimacy of a social construct such as the NQF, is determined by the democratic participation of stakeholders, whether the social construct can withstand intellectual scrutiny, and thirdly a consideration of the issues of affordability and sustainability. A social construct is socially determined, shaped by the consensus of those individuals and groups party to its construction.

This implies that the success of quality assurance, albeit government-regulated, relies on stakeholder involvement, public agreement or consensus on, for instance quality criteria, and agreement on affordability and sustainability of the endeavour. The main objectives of quality assurance must not only be made explicit by the state, but must be widely accepted by the key role players and stakeholders (Kistan 1999, 131). Should the quality assurance system be viewed as a top-down monitoring interference, the institutions are not going to own the development of internal quality assurance frameworks. Ownership of quality assurance systems therefore should allow for context-specific requirements.

One very significant development in this regard is the contribution made by the National Association for Distance Education Organizations of South Africa (NADEOSA) and the South African Institute for Distance Education (SAIDE). As important stakeholders in the higher education quality assurance debate, an overview by Welch and Glennie (2004) of emerging sets of standards and criteria, as well as strategies for quality assuring distance education, nationally and internationally, showed the following important points:

- There is an important role for separate quality criteria for distance education as well as criteria that apply to all educational provision;
- There is a need for an effective strategy to use the standards/criteria that have been developed;
- Sets of standards require continual updating and contextualization;
- Ongoing stakeholder participation is necessary in order to build consensus around quality and interpretation of standards;
- Quality assurance strategies need to stimulate self-evaluation and internal quality improvement, but they also need to prevent poor practice.

The importance of taking cognisance of the contribution made by the distance education sector lies in the astonishing reality that more than 70 per cent of the
South African learner population study through distance education (Badat 2005). This is especially serious considering the establishment of a single dedicated distance education university, after the merger of the University of South Africa (UNISA) and the Technikon South Africa (TSA). The merged institution, the new University of South Africa (UNISA) currently serves more than 200 000 students.

**THE IMPACT OF THE MERGER ON QUALITY ASSURANCE DEVELOPMENT**

According to Badat (2005, 187), the government’s determination to transform the institutional landscape, is evident by forging a single, comprehensive dedicated institution that offers qualifications that range from undergraduate certificates, diplomas and degrees to doctorates. The new institution must ensure that it offers provision that is affordable and cost effective. Distance higher education is required to contribute towards enhancing access and equity and realising the government’s participation rate of 20 per cent by 2011. More generally, the distance institution must be devoted to the continuing education needs of mature students and those in employment. Above all, distance education must confront the widespread perception of poor quality of programmes, learning materials and support, low throughput rates and success rates relative to face-to-face institutions.

Badat emphasises that the dedicated institution has to engage with the government’s notion of creating a network of centres of innovation in course design and development to enable the development of well-designed, high quality, and cost-effective learning resources and courses that build on the expertise and experience of highly regarded scholars and educators.

According to Badat (2005, 193–194), the purpose of distance education in South Africa is to provide well-conceptualised, designed and implemented academic programmes. This is to enable students to graduate as intellectuals, professionals, and critical citizens, who think theoretically, gather and process empirical data, and do all this with a deep social conscience and sensitivity to the development challenges and needs of South Africa, Southern Africa and the Africa continent.

Although many feasible economic, social and political reasons may be offered to justify such a higher education merger (Harman and Meek 2002; Badat 2005), several possible problems may arise in a merger:

- Clash of institutional culture;
- Different educational philosophies and priorities;
- Disruption of relocation for staff and students;
- The poor quality of the junior partner’s academic programmes and staff;
- Disruption of service delivery.

Badat (2005, 192–193) argues that although the merged, dedicated distance education institution has a crucial role to play in addressing the challenges of expanding access, diversifying the body learners, responding to the needs of non-
traditional students, there was no sustained or large increase in enrolments. A further cause for concern was a decline in retention rates, as well as a large number of distance education students not completing their studies.

Badat (2005, 195–203) offers several key mechanisms for steering distance education towards fulfilling its purpose, of which robust quality assurance, using the unfolding HEQC mechanisms, is most important.

Badat includes a strategy of launching a quality literacy initiative (Badat 2005, 201), as a way of obtaining the view of students and the public of what constitutes an acceptable standard of distance education provision. This is a significant strategy for any distance education provider, because Alan Tait’s (1997, 13) international perspective on quality assurance in open distance learning, is based on the premise that a quality assurance system should attempt to define, in consultation with the user, the learner, what services should be provided to the user. Considering the huge expectations of distance education delivery in South Africa (as discussed earlier), and carefully noting the thread of continuous learner involvement and participation listed in the HEQC criteria and NADEOSA quality criteria, an isolated quality literacy initiative seems inadequate and insufficient to meet the standard.

CONTINUOUS LEARNER INVOLVEMENT AND EMPOWERMENT IN QUALITY ASSURANCE IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

When scrutinising the literature on quality criteria for distance education provision in South Africa, the following ubiquitous trends became evident:

- The criteria relevant to levels of policy and planning, obtaining up-to-date, detailed information about past, present and prospective students, developing programmes, designing courses, materials and assessment strategies, and formulating and implementing learner support, interventions, all require the involvement of the learner population;
- The specific criteria relating to detailed information about past, present and prospective learners, furthermore requires the development of a learner profile that extends beyond demographic information. This sort of learner profile need to include in-depth information about the learners’ aspirations, motivations, learning styles, language proficiencies, numeric skills, computer literacy’s, special needs and interest;
- When designing and developing quality programmes and courses, the following aspects of the learners should be considered: the needs of the learners, prior knowledge and experience of the learners, location and entry levels;
- Therefore the criteria on materials development planning, requires an evaluation during the developmental process in the form of specifically obtaining ongoing feedback from learners, doing developmental testing or piloting the course.
Furthermore, in terms of constructivist learning theory, curriculum design and delivery should be informed by students’ learning needs rather than the convenience and preferences of academics. In the design of learning texts, a central problem is how best to ensure that learners are able to engage in, and be supported in an unfamiliar learning activity. This requires carefully structured materials, which identify both existing networks of knowledge/skills and those that the new domain entails and then build a learning pathway between them. In learning text, to establish such a pathway, the text must take over the dialogic role of providing support to the learner. The idea is to construct feedback in such a way that it opens up opportunities for learner to reflect and provides support (scaffolding) for them to think critically about their own work. To promote deep learning, learners need to be engaged on a cognitive and emotional level through various activities and applications.

Another dimension of learning theory pertaining to learner involvement is the creation of ‘communities of practice’. According to Wenger (2007), these are groups sharing a common concern and learning to do it better as they interact. The following general quality criteria apply:

- Learner structures, such as learner/student representative councils are established, recognised and empowered to represent learners on structures of institutional governance;
- Learners’ questions are answered quickly, clearly and supportively;
- There are effective systems and practices to assist and support prospective students, remote students and disadvantaged and disabled students;
- The institution has an effective learner tracking system in place;
- Lastly, and most importantly, the institution should include a student quality literacy campaign as part of the quality assurance project. Such an initiative would work closely with the student organizations and representative bodies and the media.

According to Naidoo (2004, 2) quality literacy and empowerment builds to a large extent on the ability to effectively deal with information, i.e. information literacy. Information literacy again requires the ability or skills to assess, evaluate and use information within larger cultural, historical, social, economic and political systems. Before students can therefore make judgements about information about quality, they need to have a proper understanding of information literacy.

Student quality literacy pertain to the development of skills to access, evaluate and use information about quality in order to make informed decisions about the choice of an institution and/or programme. Quality literacy entails the following aspects:

- Awareness of how the higher education institution and programmes work;
- Understanding what can be expected of a quality higher education institution and programme;
● Using quality related information to inform judgements and decisions about the quality of an institution and/or programme;
● Knowing how student opinion can best be heard and used in respect of the quality of institutions and programmes (Naidoo 2004).

Quality empowerment extend beyond the ability to participate, it requires students meaningful contribution to shape education. Naidoo (2004) captured this by saying that the quality of teaching and learning is shaped by engagements between the lecturer and the student. Therefore students are equally responsible to shape the quality of their learning experiences. Empowered students have the ability to make informed and correct choices with regard to institutions and programmes, but they can also play a positive role in promoting and enhancing the quality of education processes and outcomes.

Learner involvement, engagement and empowerment are required at every level of quality distance education planning, designing, delivering and reviewing.

Student involvement previously remained superficial, an add-on. However, the suggestion is that our models of learners need to shift.

DEVELOPING LEARNER INVOLVEMENT IN DISTANCE HIGHER EDUCATION

The assumption about involved learners, is according to Sharp (2006), that the institution wishes to create more demanding learners by building their aspirations and expectations, helping the learners to develop their personal vision to become more self-directed life-long learners. To raise the quality of the learning experience, more positive interaction between learners and lecturers are encouraged and facilitated. The institution supports and strengthens the student associations’ advocacy for learners and actively supports the amplification of the voice of the learners through systematic research.

Cockburn (2006) charted student involvement practice at a number of higher and further education institutions in Scotland. Firstly, he cautioned that best practice for collecting the learner voice in one institution, is not necessarily the same context for another. The way in which an institution involve learners is never static, but rather a developing trend. Learners might be involved in internal subject reviews, serve on complaints panels, or be fully involved in institutional quality audits. Effective learner involvement relies on timeous and proper training, good communication between the institution and the student organizations and between the associations themselves, and the accessibility of information.

Cockburn found that the learner voice is effective when students attend the proposed sessions, but is more effective when learners actively shape the agenda of meetings of their decisions. Cockburn (2006) devised three definitions of involvement:

● Opportunity: Students are given the opportunity to attend meetings;
● Attendance: Students take up that opportunity;
Engagement: Students not merely attend but are able to make an effective contribution.

According to Cockburn (2006, 2), where institutional staff felt that the student leaders were engaged, this seemed to be accompanied by several factors, identified by both staff and student officers:

- Students were more active than passive, which meant that they did not wait to be asked for their opinion;
- Students were able to act proactively in the sense that they could ask for items to appear on the agendas;
- Students did not merely use formal mechanisms to air their opinions, but rather were frequently able to use informal mechanisms highly effectively.

Generally speaking, Cockburn’s report states that the participating institutions found the insight of student members extremely useful and without parallel.

**THE IMPACT OF THE LEARNER VOICE ON THE QUALITY OF THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE**

When considering Badat’s (2005) view of the type of graduates that distance education in South Africa should deliver, it would be critical to analyse what could be the contribution of the learner voice on the quality of the distance learning experience.

According to Badat (2005, 193) distance higher education must provide well-conceptualised, designed and implemented academic programmes. This is to enable students to graduate as intellectuals, professionals, and critical citizens, who think theoretically, analyse with rigour, gather and process empirical data, and do all this with a deep social conscience and sensitivity to the development challenges and needs of South Africa, Southern Africa and the Africa continent. Badat (2005, 194) continues by saying that the mobilisation of human talent and potential through lifelong learning to contribute to social and economic reconstruction, to cultural and intellectual development and to help consolidate democracy. Distance education must nurture environments and cultures for the production of knowledge through different kinds of research and scholarship, and for the pursuit of critique and truth without fear of political reaction. Lastly, distance education must undertake community engagement in a way that draws on, and in turn enhance teaching, learning, and knowledge production responsibilities.

The HEQC and NADEOSA quality criteria clearly require student involvement as a minimum standard for the design and development of quality learning materials. This is evident in the criteria related to students’ needs analysis, the development of a holistic learner profile, the inclusion of learners in the evaluation of materials, and developmental or pilot testing of learning materials.

Quality distance learning materials need to meet the requirements of leading,
current learning theories. One such theory that meets the expected outcomes of Badat’s distance learners is the constructivist learning theory. Constructive teaching is based on the belief that students learn best when they gain knowledge through exploration and active learning. Students are encouraged to think and explain their reasoning instead of memorizing or reciting facts. Constructivist teaching and learning encourage problem-solving, high-order thinking skills and deep understanding by providing multiple representations of reality, focusing on knowledge construction, fostering reflective practice and encouraging learner ownership and acknowledging the learner voice in the learning process.

The learners’ voice is fundamentally essential to the knowledge creation process. The learner must be regarded as a co-developer of a quality distance education institution, but as a co-creator and co-owner of the core knowledge creation business of the institution.

CONCLUSION

Learner involvement and empowerment through acknowledging and encouraging the learners’ voice prove to be a substantial part of quality assurance in distance education in South Africa; particularly in the light of the demand for graduates with critical thinking skills who will help build the democracy.

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