Lost in translation: Transformation in the first round of institutional audits

S. McKenna*
e-mail: s.mckenna@ru.ac.za

L. Quinn*
e-mail: l.quinn@ru.ac.za
*Rhodes University
Grahamstown, South Africa

Abstract
The South African higher education institutional audit process was introduced alongside similar endeavors internationally. However, despite many similarities, each country foregrounds different concerns within their higher education quality processes. In their seminal article, Harvey and Green suggest five possible notions of quality, one of which is quality as transformation, and in South Africa the message has been clearly stated: notions of quality are intricately related to transformation. Local research has however suggested that the notion of ‘transformation’ as quality takes on particular nuances within the country’s context. In the two institutional case studies presented here, the ‘quality as transformation’ discourse appears to have been largely lost in translation. In one university transformation was not called upon to construct notions of quality; quality was primarily constructed by a discourse of excellence. In the other institution, the transformation aspects of quality seem to have been interpreted in a particularly reductionist way as relating solely to racial demographics. In both cases, this article argues that the ‘quality as transformation’ discourse prevalent in the audit documentation in the South African context was lost somewhere between the intentions embodied in national documents and the processes embarked upon by institutions.

INTRODUCTION
In South Africa, institutional audits have been conducted since 2004 by the Council on Higher Education (CHE), an advisory body to the Ministry of Education that is also responsible for quality assurance and promotion. These quality assurance and promotion functions are carried out by the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC), the only permanent committee of the CHE. As elsewhere, such bodies can be considered one of the steering mechanisms of the state (Badat 2009, 459) to improve equity and efficiency of the higher education sector. Indeed the key levers for transforming higher education in the post-apartheid era were to be national and institutional-level planning, funding and quality assurance (Jansen 2001; Ntshoe and De Villiers 2008). Although institutional audits have been constructed in a strong developmental discourse in South Africa (Searle and McKenna 2007), the role they...
play in steering the sector in directions deemed appropriate by policymakers should not be overlooked. The CHE was set up as a structure separate from the Department of Education in part to prevent it from being seen to function as an arm of government. Furthermore, the CHE has been at the forefront of researching academic autonomy and freedoms (CHE 2008; 2007a; 2006a; 2006b). It may therefore resist the notion that it serves to perform as a state steering mechanism, but the positioning of audits in terms of advancing a national agenda should not be ignored.

One of the directions in which audits have been structured to steer higher education is towards transformation. In South Africa the ‘restructuring of higher education is driven by a political agenda of transformation, redress and equity which explicitly seeks to break the apartheid mould of higher education’ (CHE 2004c, 26). ‘Transformation’ in this context is thus about eliminating the inequalities imposed by the former nationalist government (Kraak 2000, 1). This article looks at how ‘transformation’ is constructed in the CHE audit manual and the audit criteria (CHE 2004a; 2004b; 2007b) and then questions whether it has succeeded as a mechanism in this particular regard by looking at academics’ understandings of the purposes of institutional audits at two very different universities.

QUALITY AS TRANSFORMATION IN HEQC AUDIT DOCUMENTATION

As Harvey and Green (1993), in their seminal article, point out, ‘quality’ is both a ‘slippery concept’ and a ‘value-laden term’ which is understood in various ways in higher education. They suggest five notions of quality:

• Quality as exceptional
• Quality as perfection or consistency
• Quality as value for money
• Quality as transformation
• Quality as fitness for purpose.

While all of these notions can be found in the South African audit documentation, which comprises a framework document and a criteria document (later merged into one booklet) (CHE 2004a; 2004b; 2007b), the most prominent are those of ‘transformation’ and ‘fitness for purpose’. According to Harvey and Green, an understanding of quality as ‘fitness for purpose’ implies that ‘A high quality institution is one which clearly states its mission (or purpose) and is efficient and effective in meeting the goals which it has set for itself’ (1993, 19). Quality assurance then is about whether there are procedures and processes in place to ensure quality according to how that quality is defined and measured. The purpose of an audit could then be described as being ‘to evaluate whether the quality assurance system that a university has established is successfully achieving its aims and objectives’ (Harvey and Green 1993, 20). The danger in this context is that quality is defined in terms of the existence of these systems; this does not guarantee quality or tell...
you anything about the actual quality of the institution. In addition, as Harvey and Green also point out, a fitness for purpose definition of quality is linked to how the purposes of higher education are understood and it is difficult to be clear about these purposes. In the South African audit documentation, ‘fitness for purpose’ is linked to ‘fitness of purpose’ and the purpose of higher education is defined largely in terms of transformation of the higher education system in order for it to meet national demands for equity and redress. Thus in South Africa, these two notions of fitness for and of purpose are deeply entwined with the notion of transformation because without transformation, and unshackling itself from its separatist apartheid history, the sector cannot be fit for its purposes. Transformation, according to the National Commission on Higher Education report (1996), is dependent on wider participation by all social groups and the ability of higher education to respond to social and economic needs. This is a different conception of transformation to that found in much of the international literature (including Harvey and Green’s article) where definitions of quality as transformation have to do with the extent to which the education system contributes to the empowerment, in terms of conceptual ability and self-awareness, of the individual participants in higher education. This individualized understanding does occur to some small extent in the South African audit documentation, for example, ‘Transformation is assessed with regard to the development of individual students ...’ (CHE 2007b, 4). However, due to historical circumstances, ‘transformation’ in the South African context carries additional political and social connotations of transformation at an institutional and sector level (Quinn and Boughey 2009).

South Africa’s transition from apartheid and minority rule to democracy requires that all existing practices, institutions and values are viewed anew and rethought in terms of their fitness for the new era. Higher education plays a central role in the social, cultural and economic development of modern societies. In South Africa today, the challenge is to redress past inequalities and to transform the higher education system to serve a new social order, to meet pressing national needs, and to respond to new realities and opportunities (RSA 1997, 7).

Transformation is thus tied to notions of responsiveness but it is not only about responding to pressing economic needs. Fears have been expressed that universities are ‘increasingly being located within the demands of economic productivity and its requirements for particular kinds of knowledge and skills’ (Singh 2001, 8). Transformation is therefore more broadly understood as part of the national imperative to reconstruct and democratize South Africa.

‘Quality as transformation’ as described above is clearly articulated in the HEQC Institutional Audits Manual (CHE 2007b). The audit system is situated within the context of the transformation challenges that higher education in South Africa currently faces. This is described as including a context of ‘ongoing reform and restructuring in order to produce a transformed higher education system of high quality, which is able to address the complex knowledge and development needs of South African society’ (CHE 2007b, 2).
In the section in the Institutional Audits Manual that discusses the criteria for area 1 (Mission of the institution; links between planning, resource allocation and quality management), reference is made to the fact that the fitness of purpose of the mission, goals and objectives of institutions are judged in relation to their responsiveness to contexts beyond the institution and ‘The transformational role that institutions are required to play within the national higher education agenda is of key importance in this regard’ (2007b, 9).

The HEQC’s approach to quality is explicitly stated as:

- Fitness for purpose is examined in the light of the institution’s mission and goals and definition of its identity
- Fitness of purpose is examined with regard to the manner and extent to which an institution’s mission and academic activities are responsive to national priorities and needs
- Value for money is assessed by considering the extent to which efficiency, effectiveness and economies of scale are embedded in the quality management of the core functions of the institution.
- Transformation is assessed with regard to the development of individual students as well as the country’s requirements for social and economic development (2007b, 3–4).

The words ‘transformation’ and ‘transformational’ are used twenty-two times in the Audit Manual, showing that in the conceptualization of the South African audit process, quality and transformation are inextricably linked. Before the article moves to consider the extent to which the discourse of ‘quality as transformation’ was translated into the two institutional case studies, a brief description of the research context and methods is provided.

**RESEARCH FRAMEWORK**

The audit process comprises the development of an institutional portfolio by the university, an audit visit by a panel of academics from other institutions and CHE staff, and the development of an audit report by the CHE. The institution then submits a quality improvement plan. The data presented in this article arises from interviews with academic staff from two very different institutions in South Africa that had undergone such an audit process.

Institution One is a traditional university that prides itself on its high research output. It has not been part of a merger. ‘Merger’ here refers to the state’s mandatory requirement for the combination of two or more separate institutions into a single entity. The mergers were constructed as being part of the state’s steering of higher education institutions towards ‘fitness of purpose’ i.e. aligned with national transformation goals (CHE 2004c). Institution Two is a University of Technology
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which was formed through a merger. Universities of Technology were previously known as Technikons and have a focus on technology and career-oriented education as distinguishing features (Powell 2010). The two cases were selected on the basis of the different histories and institutional types of the two universities. It was only at the point of analysis that the differences in the discourses being called upon by the academics in the two universities became evident. The interviews were semi-structured and took the form of a discussion about the participants’ views of audit and their understanding of its purpose. Ten academics comprising Deans, Professors, Lecturers and Junior Lecturers were interviewed from each university. Each interviewee had participated in his/her own institutional audit by being a member of an institutional portfolio development committee and/or by being interviewed by the audit panel.

Underpinning our examination of institutional quality audits as a driver of transformation was an understanding of discourses as being a set of statements that ‘organises and gives substance to the manner in which a particular topic, object, process is to be talked about, in that it provides descriptions, rules, permissions and prohibitions of social and individual actions’ (Kress 1985, 7). The analysis brings an understanding that each discourse is underpinned by tacit assumptions and values of what counts as normal (Gee 1990, xx). We thus understand the language of the academics being interviewed as being laden with cultural value and the means through which they have organised and categorised their experiences (Henning, Van Rensburg and Smit 2004).

Because we draw on existing social structures to read audit documentation, to write institutional self-evaluation reports, and to talk about ‘quality’ in our institutions, we are (unconsciously) reproducing and/or transforming these social structures. In particular in the discussion of the data that follows, we raise questions about the extent to which the ‘quality as transformation’ discourse found in the audit manuals (CHE 2004a; 2004b; 2007b) was also evident in the interviews with the participants or whether it had been lost in the translation into institutional practice.

‘TRANSFORMATION’ AS SILENCE IN INSTITUTION ONE

Despite the explicit linking of quality and transformation in the audit documentation, Institution One was generally silent on this issue. Some respondents from Institution One, a historically advantaged institution, somewhat arrogantly understood the purpose of audits to be about getting ‘other’ institutions ‘up to speed’, for example:

The purpose of audits is to ensure quality in the system by getting people to focus on what they are doing and how they are doing it. The thing is our qualifications are generally of good quality. The real difficulty is with the weaker institutions and whether [the audits] will make a difference there, I don’t know. That’s going to be the challenge (One E).
There are certain institutions that are not meeting minimum standards and it is just politically not on to isolate those institutions and deal with them and so to have a framework that everyone must comply with is one way of getting universities that are not up to speed on track. The fact that historically advantaged universities have gone through this first serves two purposes, a, it gives [historically disadvantaged] universities time to get their houses in order and get to know what the rules are, secondly it doesn’t isolate them as the target. There is a shrewd unstated strategy that addresses the problems in the sector caused by ... prior to 1994 (One C).

Missing from these respondents’ understandings of the purpose of audits was the understanding that all South African higher education institutions are in need of transformation, albeit in a range of different ways. According to Badat (2009, 457), aspects of South African higher education in need of transformation include participation rate (taking into account issues of race, class, gender) as well as ‘... intellectual discourse, teaching and learning, curriculum and texts, and knowledge production and research’. He argues that all these aspects of South African higher education ‘were strongly affected by racist, patriarchal and authoritarian apartheid social order and the socio-economic and political priorities of the apartheid separate development programme’ (ibid.). However, there was little evidence in Institution One of this understanding of transformation.

In Institution One, the understanding that the audit process was partly to do with transformation was expressed by only two of the ten participants and seems to have been understood retrospectively rather than at the time of preparation for the audit:

I don’t think that transformation was part of our audit process. It wasn’t part of the agenda. It was only afterwards with [new management] that we are asking “What is happening with transformation?” (One B).

In hindsight we should have had a more representative group [preparing for and participating in the audit]. We worked hard at making it representative but there are new voices now since the new management ... [they were here during the audit] but we were not taking those voices into account when we were writing for the audit. They were very quiet at that stage. We could perhaps have had a more interesting and useful debate had those people been involved (One A).

It would seem that at this institution transformation was not understood as integral to quality. It was only when the institution received the audit report in which they were severely criticized for the slow pace of transformation in the institution that some people in the institution realized that the audit process had not involved critical self reflection and that issues of transformation had not been seriously considered as impacting on quality in the institution’s preparation for the audit visit:

There wasn’t the critical self-reflection here. There was both compliance and back-patting. What about the gay student? Or working class black student? Step outside of the mainstream and maybe it’s not so fantastic as we presented it (One B).
The audit was far more about transformation than we expected. But when we went back to the original HEQC documentation it was all there so we have to ask ourselves, why were we so surprised? Because there is a major emphasis on fitness of purpose [in the HEQC documents] (One A).

It seemed that for Institution One, the audit process was seen as an opportunity to demonstrate excellence rather than as a mechanism for critical self-reflection.

The audit report tapped into the institutional culture thing right off. We all knew it but we were complacent and we all allowed it to go like that. But the portfolio didn’t touch on it. The portfolio ... you know we all looked and thought “Wow, look how pretty we are”. But there was a lot of make-up and the audit process was very good. Those people knew what they were doing, they uncovered, they got under the skin. And sometimes you need to be told “Emperor, you have no clothes”. ... There needs to be a reality check, “Ok, that is what you think but have you thought about these things as well?” (One A).

Much of the interview data from Institution One pertained to their ‘high standards’ and ‘academic excellence’. There was also a view expressed that some of the negative feedback provided in the audit report arose out of the institution being targeted in some way because of its reputation for excellence:

Maybe it was because it was [this] University. There were some unfortunate things [that happened in the audit] (One A).

Readings (1996, 21- 43) in an extended discussion on the meaninglessness of the notion of excellence says: ‘Excellence is invoked ... as always, to say precisely nothing at all: it deflects attention from the questions of what quality and pertinence might be, who actually are the judges of a relevant or a good University, and by what authority they become those judges’ (1996, 32). Barnett (2004, 64) describes the idea of excellence as ‘standing for no purpose, no ideal and no concept in particular’. Nash (2010) links the apparently unavoidable aspiration of institutions and academics for ‘excellence’ with the rise of managerialism in higher education. He critiques the uncritical acceptance of the notion and the fact that ‘... the idea of excellence itself ... remains largely invisible and hence unquestioned’ (Nash 2010, 2).

Some of the interviews with academics within Institution One indicated a view that the institution was ready to move to self-accreditation. There is provision, within the audit documentation, for self-accreditation status to be awarded at some point in the audit cycles.

It’s a lot of extra work. I would think that self-accreditation would be the best outcome in terms of the effort put in - otherwise the heavy workload associated with audit wasn’t worth it (One F).

A view was expressed that all institutions had been included in an initial accountability
type stage because it was not ‘politically tenable’ (One F) to overtly state that some institutions are of a better quality than others or have more capacity to quality assure themselves than others. This view that they were ready for self-accreditation was expressed as relating to notions of quality as excellence; no mention was made of self-accreditation as being related to institutional willingness and ability to critically reflect on practices on an ongoing basis. So it may be quite some time before we reach the stage of a ‘sustainable culture of quality improvement’ (Luckett 2007, 3).

‘TRANSFORMATION’ AS SIMPLICITICALLY UNDERSTOOD IN INSTITUTION TWO

In Institution Two participants seemed to be aware that the audit process included looking at quality as transformation. However, despite the way in which transformation is framed in the audit documentation, this institution seems to have understood transformation in a different, more superficial and perhaps mechanistic way.

I don’t think transformation came into our audit because we have a diverse student body (Two Q).

[Audits are] difficult for historically white universities because the student body is not transformed (Two L).

The understanding, exhibited by some respondents, in this institution was that if you had enrolled more black students and employed more black staff members then the institution had ‘transformed’ and it was not therefore an issue that required critical scrutiny.

We were ready because we have looked at equity in our staff and students so the problem wasn’t transformation. It was policies and practices (Two R).

One interviewee at this institution offered a different, more critical view. He expressed frustration with the compliance approach rather than the more nuanced understanding of quality provided in the documents:

We’ve got a compliance model. Before the audit the issue of quality was everywhere, every committee, Senate. You don’t hear it anymore .... What is quality really? Have we even begun to grapple with it? (Two S).

Research on the higher education context in South Africa conducted by Scott, Yeld and Hendry (2007) indicates that mere compliance in the form of, for example, admitting more students to higher education does not necessarily lead to improved quality of the education received by students. In fact their research shows that the throughput and graduation rates in the higher education system in South Africa are
poor and that, overwhelmingly, the success rate of black students is far below that of their white peers. To ensure that all students are granted not just formal access but also ‘epistemological access’ (Morrow 2004) requires high-level systemic transformation. As Scott et al. conclude:

Strategies that are seen as necessary conditions for improvement include the reform of core curriculum frameworks; building educational expertise in the sector to enable development and implementation of teaching approaches that will be effective in catering for student diversity; and clarifying and strengthening accountability for educational outcomes (2007, viii).

The interview data from both institutions provided evidence of a strong reliance on ‘common sense’ understandings of quality and quality processes (see Luckett 2007, 1) that may account for the surface interpretation of the issue of transformation in Institution Two. Quality was seen to be readily recognizable and measurable. There seemed to be an assumption amongst the participants (with one notable exception) that all institutions and academics have a shared understanding of quality and that the audits had been undertaken to simply provide external verification of the institution’s success or failure in achieving this. In keeping with the common sense understanding that there is a shared notion of quality, it was unsurprising that the audit process was understood almost exclusively in terms of compliance to the criteria.

There’s the list of criteria. You have to have all your evidence of that (Two L).

We were told to have five years’ worth of examination reports, external exams you know, in case the audit panel wanted it. And they never even came to the department (Two R).

The data from both institutions included very little evidence of critique of the notion of quality or even of the imposition of audit processes. The only criticisms expressed by respondents related to the amount of work it took for institutions to prepare for the audits. Luckett (2007) calls on Barnett (2003) to warn of privileging certain meanings of quality - we would argue that the data showed a privileging of a ‘common sense’ understanding of quality. The criteria were read as a surface list and the audit framework document (despite its overt transformation agenda) seems to have been disregarded or set aside. The audits were seen in some interviews very explicitly to be about the verification of evidence which is not seen to represent quality, but which comes to be understood as being quality in and of itself.

You have to show, you know, that you have got the policies and the processes such as external examination, to show, you know, that you have quality (Two L).

Most of the participants interviewed from both institutions understood the audit process as primarily being about checking for technical compliance to the audit
criteria. This was undoubtedly exacerbated by the fact that the original audit documentation provided by the CHE separated the framework from the criteria into two booklets (CHE 2004a; CHE 2004b). The ‘Framework for Institutional Audits’ booklet provided far more emphasis on the underlying philosophy than could be found in the ‘Criteria for Institutional Audits’ booklet. It was evident from the interviews that, of those who had read any HEQC documentation, most were only familiar with the criteria booklet and believed this to be a list of required evidence. For example one lecturer said:

There are nineteen criteria, which the HEQC give you and then the portfolio says if you have done them all (Two O).

In line with Luckett’s critique (2007), most participants in Institution Two in particular understood that the existence of the various policies and processes outlined in the criteria booklet constituted quality in itself. One lecturer speculated that quality is measured by throughput rates and information regarding graduate placement. Many participants were unfamiliar with the philosophical aspects of the HEQC audit documents so their understanding of the audit process tended to be technical. Compliance with the technical aspects alone cannot, we would argue, enhance quality or lead to transformation.

Our interviews with respondents from the two very different institutions thus seem to indicate that the understanding of transformation (and quality) in the audit documentation was ‘lost in translation’ by the two institutions, although in very different ways and for different reasons.

CONCLUSION

There is an assumption that audits have potential power to transform institutional practices and enhance quality. But this article argues that the transformation discourse in the audit documentation was not evident in the discourses of academics at both the case study institutions. In one case, the transformational aspects of quality processes in national documentation were largely not seen at all as they fell into an institutional ‘blind spot’. In the other institution, the notion of transformation was simplistically understood as entailing increasing the number of black students and staff at the institution. In both institutions there were one or two participants who grappled with the issues of transformation at a deeper level and raised questions about the quality of their institution’s educational provision because of a perceived lack of transformation. But it would seem that the transformational discourses in the audit documentation had not been translated into institutional discourses. The audit process in itself does not seem to have been a mechanism to activate this agenda within institutions. Historical conditions, capacity constraints and institutional cultures may be among the reasons why the notion of quality as transformation was lost along the way. While this research is a preliminary analysis, it does raise concerns
that need to be addressed in the next round of audits. In particular it suggests that the presence of transformation discourses in audit documentation alone is not going to lead to deep engagement with issue of transformation as a crucial element of quality at institutional level. However, we would argue that the post-audit responses from our research participants show an awareness of what was lost in translation. Perhaps the next round of institutional audits will result in engagement with issues of quality as transformation which will reflect greater contextual awareness and will show institutions bringing critical reflection to issues of epistemological access for all the students that have been granted formal access.

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