

Full Length Research Paper

Exploration of the learning model as a strategy in enhancing the quality of academic programme

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Accepted 24 September, 2012

The intent of the study was to implore the learning model as process of improving quality at higher education institutions. This study was conducted through the use of semi-structured interviews and documental analysis process. The study did attract responses from 45 academics who work closely with academic quality matters as heads of schools. Majority of the respondents considered a learning model as approach towards quality assurance improvement. The policies as applied in higher Education were also the main drivers. Most of the responses felt that even though quality is a cumbersome matter they can manage the process.

Key words: Exploration. Learning Model. Quality. Self-evaluation. Enhancement.

INTRODUCTION

In South Africa, policy developments were monitored by the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) (1996) in response to the challenges facing Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). 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 higher education institutions (HEIs). Henard (2007) argues that, it is important that HEI should conduct their own self-evaluation up to the point of producing a report. It is important that all stakeholders should make their contribution to the self-evaluation reports. In this whole process, internal self-evaluation would form the basis of QA. In particular, the White Paper 3 on HE (1997) clearly states that the primary responsibility of QA rests with the higher education institution itself.

Quality is increasingly being considered as a key factor in promoting competition. As a consequence, many quality management systems seem to be outwards orientated, placing more emphasis on the external presentation of the institution than on its internal development processes. It is a fact that an institution's reputation and its dependence on the external environment (e.g. funding/ budget) can be extremely influential factors for internal QA (Kasozi, 2006).

HEIs are beginning to realise the need to build up self-evaluation and more generally, foster an internal quality

culture. However, HE has always been driven by the need for quality but the explosion of external national QA systems worldwide is making greater demands on institutions to be more transparent in this area. If external accountability has become more systematic, then it is important that an internal procedure becomes more developed and visible to the public. This paper intends to implore the role of quality developing a learning environment.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

HE has always been driven by the need for quality but the burgeoning of external national QA systems in most countries such as Finland, Denmark and Austria is making greater demands on institutions to be more transparent in this area. By and large, external measures have been useful in promoting quality, although there have been documented cases, here and there, of intrusive procedures (Jensen 2004). Nevertheless, if external accountability has become more systematic, then it is important that internal procedures become more developed and transparent to the public.

Internal QA seems, at present, to be receiving a great deal of attention at HEIs. These institutions are seeking guidance in determining the most appropriate model on

which to base their internal QA policies and procedures. Thus, this study is an attempt to provide information on some of the available models. It is, however, by no means exhaustive. HEIs should feel free to experiment, but should take care to avoid unnecessary duplication of effort. Therefore, the best practices in internal self evaluation are difficult to present.

The requirements of external QA bodies that may be legislated should be met at all times (Jacobs 2000). Many businesses such as industrial and manufacturing models for internal QA are available for adaptation, but HE institutions should decide for themselves which are the most appropriate for their purposes. Such purposes may vary from merely satisfying the external QA agency's requirements, to introducing serious mechanisms at HEIs with the purpose of improving internal quality (Woodhouse, 2006).

An overview of quality assurance in Higher Education Institutions

The concept of quality is not new; it has always been part of the academic tradition. It is the outside world that now emphasises the need for attention to quality, with the relationship between HEIs and society having changed. This encapsulates the profound changes in the context of HE; including growth, diversity, changes in size and in the nature of HE. This has been accompanied by a growing state interest in quality, demands for accountability and the establishment of national quality agencies (Newton, 2007). The notion of quality covers those elements of an HEI culture that have the strongest impact on quality teaching.

It must be emphasised that in studies of quality culture, with respect to HEIs, this concept is perceived mainly in terms of the total quality management (TQM) philosophy, which reveals the role of leadership in creating a culture based on the constant need for improvement, team work and the participation of all in the process making (Kowalkiewicz, 2007). Majority of HEIs have focused on working out the procedures of quality evaluation and assurance, which may appear insufficient if not accompanied by the evolution of the university organisational culture towards a quality culture, since what is crucial for the success of any action aimed at quality enhancement, is a quality-orientated system of values.

Academic quality results from the leadership that develops the best-in-class policy and strategy, customer and market focus and people management with the academic and efficient use of resources.

Learning region model

The learning region model is premised on the fact that "institutions which regulate economic activity are

increasingly being regionalized and economic success is becoming increasingly dependent upon trust, norms, values and tacit and personal knowledge" (Favish, 2005), which is easier to achieve within regions. Therefore, writers such as Kanter have asserted that the "challenge is to find ways to which the global economy can work locally by unlocking those resources which distinguish one place from another" (Favish, 2005). Building on the approach to understanding the transformation of the economy, writers such as Lundvall Johnson have operationalised the role of HEIs in the context of the learning economy and the learning region. She further defines the learning economy as an economic where the success of individuals, firms and regions, reflect the capability to learn (and forget old practices); where change is rapid and old skills become obsolete and new skills are in demand; where learning includes the building of competencies, not just increased access to information; where learning is going on in parts of society, not just in high-tech sectors; and net job creation is in knowledge intensive sectors (Favish, 2005).

Favish (2005), in analysing the implications of the notion of the learning economy, has articulated the notion of a learning region, which would reflect the importance of lifelong learning to cope with changing patterns of skills demands, new ways of delivering education and training made possible by Information and Communication Technology (ICTs), and the changing nature of knowledge production. She summarises the challenge for universities as:

Blending and combining competition in the new enterprise environment with collaboration; fostering and supporting boundary spanners who can work across the borders of the university in effective discourse with other organizations and their different cultures; fostering cultural change to enable universities to speak and work with partners from many traditions and persuasions as more learning organizations emerge and together enrich their various overlapping learning zones or regions (Favish, 2005:110).

One of the limitations of this model is that the notions of the learning economy and the learning region are potentially too closely intertwined. Thus, there is a danger of assigning primary importance to upskilling people to cope with the rapid changes in technology in order to enhance economic competitiveness, and marginalising issues related to social justice and equity, which may be manifest at local or community levels. In the absence of equal prominence being accorded to the social manifestations of globalisation, there is a danger that institutions articulating stronger local or community orientations could be regarded as inferior in status to those institutions oriented towards supporting the world of work, technological development and economic competitiveness.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this section, the methodology used in the study is highlighted and unpacked for the smooth organisation of the process.

The researcher made use of the descriptive survey as it fits perfectly this kind of study. Questionnaires and structured interviews were utilised. The purpose of using the qualitative research method is to describe internal quality and to explore how it can be used effectively in South Africa's UoTs. It is also used to explain quality notions and concepts and to examine how they relate to institutional evaluation.

Qualitative data were gathered in as many ways as the researcher's creativity permitted. Although the most widely used sources were observation and interviewing, analyses of records and documents are common, and it was also used.

The research strategy is idiographic, in which a single case and its structural coherence with a larger context are examined. Cohen et al. (2007) indicate that one should favour the views on social reality that stress the importance of the subjective experience of individuals in the creation of the social world. The search for an understanding should be on different issues and be approached in a totally different way. The principal concern is with an understanding of the way in which the individual creates, modifies and interprets the world he/she finds himself/herself in.

Population and sample

The population of this study consists of all six Universities of Technology (UoTs) academic heads of department (HODs) and quality assurance managers (QAMs). From six UoTs the researcher decided to select four institutions and forty five participants as they were able to participate during the distribution of questionnaires and in interviews.

The characteristics that distinguish them as urban centres are that the same external quality provider has accredited these institutions; in addition to this they follow the same curriculum and make use of convenorship.

Data collection

The data for this study consist of three kinds, namely, primary, secondary and tertiary data. Secondary data include academic journals, and form the basis for the theoretical study and quality analysis. Secondary data were supplemented by tertiary data obtained from the literature and references in academic journals, as well as from available unpublished research. The primary data were collected from the heads of academic departments by means of questionnaires and structured interviews.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section reports on the research findings of the qualitative analysis in this study. The method of reporting has been included in order to assess the situation as perceived in the field. Therefore, the data were collected through the use of structured one-to-one interviews with QAM. It was also imperative to support the use of interviews by QAM with the support of the questionnaires from the HOD as the immediate recipients of quality process. All these methods of data collection procedures for this study, being the interviews and questionnaires, aided in eliciting diverse views on answers to the

research questions. Furthermore, this study focused on the methodological aspects of the QA system as it has been identified as the key indicator for the study.

The discussion concentrates on data obtained following the administration of feedback-questionnaires and of personal interviews with heads of academic departments (HODs) and institutional quality managers (QAMs). At this stage, the researcher intends to present the responses and the views of the respondents as they are and does not intend to argue or offer his opinion or analysis at this stage.

An overview of response analysis

QA is seen as a process of continuous improvement in the teaching and learning process which, to a certain extent, will be achieved via the various pathways of employing the mechanisms, internal and external to the HEIs. QA is a process of maintaining standards in products or services through inspection or in testing samples. Lastly, it is imperative that society should be concerned about HEIs as they are a national hope for the development of the nation; therefore, accountability aspects should be employed in the process from time to time, when this issue is discussed.

It is in this scenario that the QAMs and HODs were chosen to participate in this study as they are mandated with the responsibility of QA by their respective institutions. Both stakeholders are challenged to demonstrate quality of some sort in their managerial and leadership capabilities of students and various stakeholders within their responsibility.

The particular need to which the legislation referred was the need of quality education provided in HEIs that government supported financially. Fuelling the initial fears was the embedding of QA explicitly in the legislative framework. The point raised here is the role that government plays as an umbrella body introducing various national imperatives with which HEIs will have to comply and it is the responsibility of the various institutions to develop policies that will assist institutions to respond to national guidelines.

The point enhanced by the policy issues is the tensions within the policy-making process between the state and the quasi-state, with no clear boundary between their respective spheres of authority, accompanied by the realisation that both may have different interpretations of what constitutes desirable policy outcomes. The researcher explained to the respondents that they should bear in mind that the evolution of the policy-making process by their respective institutions is not simply a record of expanding institutional powers. This tension between institutional policy and government policies was bound to happen, as experienced by the respondents. It can be argued that the governance of QA raises important issues with regard to leadership.

It was important for the researcher to establish if the

Table 1. Analysis of quality assurance policies.

Valid	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent (%)	Cumulative percent (%)
Yes	42	93	93	93
No	3	7	7	100
Total	45	100	100	

Table 2. Respondents' views regarding the measurements of quality.

Valid	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent (%)	Cumulative percent (%)
Yes	42	93	93	93
No	3	7	7	100
Total	45	100	100	

HEIs have compliant processes in place when dealing with QA at their respective institutions. Respondents were asked about the existence of such policies with regard to the guidance of and compliance with their internal quality mechanism. A total of 3(7%) of respondents were in contrast to the views of the HEQC which believe that all HEIs should be geared towards the revisiting of QA policies, not quite at the developmental stage. Furthermore, these views of inequality in compliances with regard to policies should have been eradicated by the intervention of the HEQC capacity development structures. The 3(7%) respondents clearly indicated the difficulty of identifying quality compliance in their respective institutions.

However, few would agree that after the first round of re-accreditation and of institutional audits, universities should be at the advanced stage of compliance. The respondents indicated that they are still at the developmental stage and that they are really working towards compliance that will guide the quality culture in their HEIs. It is indeed difficult to strategise if there are no policies in place to act as a guide.

The analysis of the submissions indicates that 42(93%) of the institutions had some sort of policy on QA (Table 1). However, in most cases these policies have not yet been translated into plans and strategies. There was not much available documentation, such as manuals or regulations, reflecting QA arrangements.

Irrespective of how policy-makers within the institution, as well as institutional leaders may decide to shift and place the focus on policy implementation and its discourse and practice; critical questions pertinent to the relevance and academic worth of the institution and its learning programme, will always engage quality scrutiny and enquiry into issues pertaining to the public good (Table 2).

In order to execute its mandate for quality promotion, the institutional audits and programme accreditation, the HEQC, need to draw on the expertise, experience and understanding of those who work in the HE sector. While it is true that most HEIs are still grappling with the QA

issue in a co-ordinated and aligned way, no institution can use this as an excuse for providing inferior standards. It is in this regard that the researcher included the measurement question in the study.

The researcher felt that it was very important to find the viewpoint of the respondents regarding quality measurements. It has been mentioned from the outset that the study comprises 45 participants; 42(93%) believed that quality cannot be measured while 3(7%) differed from the rest and believe that quality is measurable and can be determined by, among other things, a students' satisfaction survey.

The institutionalisation of quality enhancement

The most critical challenge to the idea of quality enhancement is posed by its institutionalisation. Conventions for quality enhancement need to be defined and systematic structures constructed to develop its practices. Inevitably, the unfolding of its process forces a return to the question of who has the power to determine the meaning of the key concepts, how are they to be put into effect even in institutions that apparently endorse them and what should the policy outcomes be?

Regardless of what model should be constructed, the key area to explore is that of what is happening on ground, that is in the universities; how the two bodies HEQC and QAM interact with each other and relate to the universities, and how the representative institutions will respond to the emerging outcomes.

However, there are those who remain sceptical. In the words of one senior quality officer:

"Quality enhancement has become more talked about, more promoted and the HEQC audit methodology says that it encourages quality enhancement but I am not convinced. I will wait until we have gone through one; the rhetoric is there but I think they are going to come in and see what our procedures are like, as they have always done. There is no sign that they are going to focus on things that might encourage us to really take the

enhancement side more seriously. The development of the quality agenda suggests that ideas and power struggles are intimately interrelated but their visibility varies as policy unfolds: ideas become more prominent as policy is formulated. Politics dominates the formal construction of policy (legislative process) while both politics and the ideological struggle interact at the implementation stage."

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A summary of the findings is presented as follows.

The new learning environment

An institution may have a range of motivations for adopting new approaches in quality mechanisms or a quality framework that can expand thinking and therefore problem-solving capacities when considering a performance quality model or framework. For UoTs to transform themselves and to contribute to transforming the world, they should include QA in their research, teaching and in community engagement. Building legitimate QA transformation is done partly by exhibiting alternative quality mechanisms or models that can guide us into a more consistent and uniform approach.

The learning approach may be seen as the first step to building a quality system that will be able to facilitate a better coordinated effort. The learning approach can be constructed from the students' performance aspect and most, if not all respondents acknowledged the fact they have to carefully monitor throughput, as well as student progression; the main aspect being whether they do it in line with certain compliance issues or in an individualistic manner. It is in this regard that the study revealed that the means to maintaining the position of the learning approach by providing flexible solutions to student needs will not do the university any good in the long run.

From an institutional perspective regarding the current problem, there was an imperative to get a return on the investment (ROI). Ultimately, though, an institution will be judged by the quality of the teaching and learning it offers its students. To improve the learning experiences offered, it is essential that there is an emphasis on improvement from the level of the individual subject lecturer up through the organisation to the activities of senior managers. The following comment is pertinent:

This does not imply that the vision of the programme and the planning of its implementation need be a top-down process. On the contrary, there needs to be ownership, vision and enthusiasm at all levels of the organisation.

Institutional quality improvement processes

The study was conducted with four UoTs, and

importantly, these institutions represent a total of 90% of student enrolment in UoTs. There has been a concerted effort by UoTs to set up quality processes leading to the development of a student evaluation system which individual academics and programme facilitators make available as a means of improving quality. In some UoTs, the use of moderators is seen as the main indicator of quality. The afore-mentioned process, according to the UoTs' designers suggests that the improvement of the next offering of subjects is as a result of the assessment of current practices. Such a system is predicated upon the evaluation of an educational activity leading to improvements in subsequent attempts; this is congruent with the action inquiry process. The learning from this process is too valuable to be left untapped within any one subject or minor project. Unless the information is shared, the institution as a whole does not necessarily benefit from these projects. Much can be gained by facilitating the sharing of new knowledge and experiences across the institution:

The university must have a technical and pedagogical innovative environment for research and development projects, providing opportunities for trial and experiment and to collect feedback on these via the QA process...many such pilot experiments in HE have been conducted in isolation from the HE management process. Unless the evaluation occurs within the context of the institutional process as a whole, the valuable learning opportunities inherent in these projects will be lost to the institution.

The researcher considered evaluation reports of QA and concluded that the context in which an innovation occurs has to be considered...the benefits were short-lived and /or did not transfer. This finding offers a salutary caution to all educational innovators and underscores the need to view innovation within the institutional contexts in which it will thrive or die.

Thus, the institutional quality processes need to be such that the culture and procedures encourage the flow of information across subject and course and across departmental and faculty boundaries. It is the contention of this research that where quality cycles do not enable this flow of information, the lessons learned do not easily go beyond the subject concerned, students do not benefit and the ROI is reduced.

It is in this regard that more than half of the respondents (64%) were of the view that the flow of information process is easily followed. The remaining respondents expressed a different approach to the flow of information and how it is disseminated. They contended that in some UoTs the quality agenda is not organised holistically which creates a problem of coordinating quality matter from the central position. The non-existence of the quality model was one issue that respondents perceived as a problematic factor; thus creating difficulties for the advancement of the quality process and the coordination of a more coherent

approach. About 28% of the respondents expressed their frustrations with regard to how things are done at their respective institutions.

A model for promoting institutional quality processes

A 'conversational model' of learning where a 'conversation' can be considered as a two-way flow of information is proposed. In essence, the researcher posits that learning occurs when the student acts for a particular purpose and then receives feedback on the action. The student then assimilates and reflects upon the feedback in order to re-conceptualise and articulate a new understanding to the lecturer. This is a classic action research cycle of goal-action-feedback-modified- action, integral to the quality improvement process, with the critical part of the process being the reflection. In supporting the importance of reflection as part of the learning cycle, asserts: "my own assumption is that helping academics to improve their teaching is best done using a theory that helps academics reflect on what they are doing". The researcher contends that a similar model of learning can be applied at institutional level.

Establishing an institutional learning conversation

Most of the inexperienced HODs (67%), particularly those of fewer than five years' experience in the service of HE, view the study as a revelation, as they indicated that they have never been exposed to QA teams at their different institutions. Those with more experience, that is those with more than five years in HE (15%), were more confident about how QA matters should be organised; their only concern being the operational aspects. The latter group of HODs who have been at HEIs for more than ten years (18%), in most cases, were the ones leading the process at their respective UoTs.

Most HODs felt that in going forward, the process of deliberating on QA issues was of great value to them; they felt that they were given the platform to discuss quality issues and also to voice their opinion regarding the quality direction of the institution. It is in this instance that some institutions feel that they remain focused on working towards a quality culture, as there is a general perception that exists that quality is a long-term process and cannot be achieved after just two trials. It was interesting to note that the majority of the respondents have already begun entrenching quality in their daily routines, supported by clear directives.

Some HODs raised the question of the contestation of territory between traditional university and UoTs. There is a strong feeling that academics from large traditional university marginalised some HODs, who come from small HEIs, particularly UoTs. HODs have the perception that the HE sector has become a battlefield where

contestation for power is all too real. UoTs, they maintain, are treated as insignificant and this attitude restricts them in making certain decisions and in contributing to the wider HE community in a meaningful way. For example, UoTs have not been strong in research and that in itself, is a disadvantage within the HE community as most rated researchers come from traditional universities. There is also the problem of similar programmes being offered by a traditional university and a UoT at the same time. The perception still exists that UoTs are still 'Technikons' and they will never be universities in the true sense of the word. This contestation can be seen clearly when teams of evaluators, during the institutional re-accreditations process, comprise academics from traditional universities will be invited to evaluate UoTs. The atmosphere is often hostile and their criticism devastating.

In conclusion, UoTs are still regarded as a second-grade universities, according to some of the respondents.

As indicated earlier, it is not enough to have 'learning conversations' or 'quality improvement cycles' operating at distinct levels within an organisation. There should be overlap so that these conversations occur across boundaries. For institutional learning to take place, the project team (self-evaluation team) should be in dialogue with the institution. In the context of a project, to improve the teaching and learning in a subject, the academic becomes not only a researcher of a discipline, but a researcher in how to teach the discipline. The benefits of the project team's sharing its learning with other staff will lead to improved learning outcomes for a wider range of students and staff. With restricted budgets and in the stringent economic environment in which today's institutions operate, it is too costly for projects to be funded without any institutional benefit coming out of them.

The rationale and the logic of the findings have indicated that a clear directive and purpose in performing a self evaluation task plays a crucial role in making the process more effective. However, in the current system, there is a need to enhance clarity through training and collaboration.

Although we can agree with or contest the idea of political interference, it is important to realise that this presents a paradigm shift in the understanding of what quality actually means to us; that is, the culture of accountability and compliance with national imperatives. It is in this regard that the study outlined the national HE DoE structure in order to assist UoTs with compliance issues and to emphasise that strong institutional policies be built on, together with a monitoring process to ensure compliance. Institutional self-evaluation principles are in actual fact very simple, indicating that QA is evidenced-based and that logic is an active force in making it a success. It is recommended that clearly defined concepts linked together to form a coherent system should be employed to build a strong self-evaluation

report. This system makes the results more valid as prior planning is undertaken accordingly.

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