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A perspective on tensions between external quality assurance requirements and institutional quality assurance development: a case study

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Abstract

This paper reviews the development of quality assurance in technikons, and identifies some of the tensions between institutional quality assurance approaches and the approach of the external accreditation body. The account is given against a background of a higher education sector formerly characterised by a distinctive differentiation between technikons and universities, and which have followed significantly different quality assurance roads. The development of a unifying qualifications framework in South Africa has drawn all higher education institutions together in a single band, with one body responsible for quality assurance of all these institutions. The experience of technikons regarding quality assurance has lessons for the future.

Background

Technikons, unlike universities, are fairly young in tertiary education in South Africa, having developed from senior technical colleges, and being established as higher education institutions in 1979. Their evolution has continued ever since, and in 1995 they introduced technological degrees. As part of the continuing evolution, some technikons are currently exercising the choice to develop into technological universities.

The external quality assurance body for technikon education has followed its own path of evolution. At their establishment, technikons were not autonomous, and they reported to the National Department of Education. Central control extended to the implementation of the same nationally published and regulated curriculum. To attain some level of autonomy, the Committee of Technikon Principals initiated actions to establish a certification council, following the example of the Council for National Academic Awards for Polytechnics in the United Kingdom. Thus the Certification

Council for Technikon Education (SERTEC), was established, by the Act of that name, Act 88 of 1986, as an autonomous, statutory body. The initial purpose of SERTEC was to assure equality of standards across technikons, and to certify successful learning. Through input of technikon representatives on the SERTEC Council, 'equal' standards were altered to the assurance of 'minimum' standards for instruction and examination. This would allow technikons to strive for excellence and enrichment, with the minimum standards focused on satisfying employers and professional bodies at all times (SERTEC, 1998, p.1).

In the early 1990's, as technikons were developing plans to introduce technological degrees, the SERTEC Council reviewed its role, and through an amendment Act (Act 185 of 1993), was authorised to accredit technikons and agricultural colleges that satisfied its norms and standards. In its new role, SERTEC introduced the requirement of self-evaluation for every national qualification offered by a technikon and for which it sought accreditation. The accreditation model followed by SERTEC was one of self-evaluation reports followed by two-day site visits by committees composed of peers, industry and professional bodies, to validate the self-evaluation, and ensure that the prescribed norms and standards were met. The focus, initially, was firmly on programme evaluation and accreditation, but in 1998 SERTEC introduced aspects of institutional evaluation into its evaluation framework.

In the same period, South Africa entered a new dispensation with the change to a new democratic government, and with it came changes in the approach to education. In the new approach, the focus in education was on the outcomes achieved through learning, with particular attention to those generic learning outcomes that were fundamental to learning. A new national qualifications framework (NQF) consisting of eight levels, of which levels five to eight applied to higher education, accompanied this change. Through the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) Act (Act 58 of 1995), structures to register learning outcomes at the different levels, and monitor the quality of learning, were established. The important consequence of this development for technikons was that a new external quality assurance body would serve the entire higher education sector in South Africa, namely, the Council for Higher Education and its executive committee, the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC). Their own external quality assurance body, SERTEC, would therefore no longer serve technikons.

Against this background, this analysis considers some of the tensions between external quality assurance requirements and institutional quality goals, and the possible implications for the new external evaluation bodies.

The nature of the tensions

The tensions between external quality assurance requirements and institutional quality goals, which emerged in some technikons over the past ten years, relate to a range of issues. These include changing notions of quality, emerging differences about basic quality assurance orientations such as accountability and improvement, concerns about the nature of the frameworks for reporting on quality assurance to the external quality assurance body, and the methodology of external evaluation visits.

The interpretation of quality

Technikons deliver career-focused programmes that are responsive to the needs and demands of employers and professional bodies. Employment of successful learners from technikons and the recognition of technikon qualifications by industry have always been regarded as strong indicators of the quality of teaching and learning in technikons. Fitness for purpose, as a notion of quality, was considered appropriate, and firmly entrenched from the outset. As technikons developed, and particularly after the introduction of degrees, this rather restricted view of quality became less acceptable. SERTEC, in its 1996 guideline document on internal quality assurance, provided perspectives on other interpretations of quality, such as excellence, value for money and transformation, with the latter referring to the continuous development and enhancement of new knowledge as part of the empowerment of learners. This influenced many technikons' interpretation of quality.

Within this broader interpretation of quality, the input of business and industry in the development of qualifications and learning programmes remained important. This included, in particular, their input regarding the experiential learning component of learning programmes, their monitoring of the delivery of programmes and learning opportunities, typically through advisory committees and mentorship, and continued support of specific qualifications. There was, however, a growing conviction in technikons that there should be a balance between the needs and demands of stakeholders and the input from technikons regarding the appropriate academic foundation for the different programmes, as well as the broader social development of learners. For some technikons, student life was important, and development and achievement in sport and cultural activities formed an integral part of the learning experience.

The broader interpretation of quality, together with the development of quality management systems in technikons, resulted in a need for new frameworks for self-reflection, which differed from the existing SERTEC framework for self-evaluation.

The emerging tensions centred on the approach of external evaluators to interrogate the degree of compliance with the norms of SERTEC and industry. The transformation that learners experienced, the value added to their knowledge and experience, and the degree to which faculty were achieving their excellence targets in the different programmes, in short, the application of their notion of quality, was not part of the evaluation framework.

The improvement-accountability continuum

The question of whether the approach to quality assurance should be one of improvement or accountability is an enduring one. The orientation of the external quality assurance body in this regard obviously influences the approach of individual institutions.

The central control exercised by government over technikons, and the accountability to employers and professional bodies, clearly influenced the approach of SERTEC. Technikons initially accepted and supported such an emphasis on accountability. The strong focus of the external quality assurance framework on the control of

examinations and their moderation, the adherence to the published national curriculum, and the emphasis in the curriculum on work-place practice was quite acceptable to technikons. On an accountability-improvement continuum, technikons were initially firmly oriented towards accountability. It could be argued that, at that point in the development of technikons, this was appropriate. Improvement was not totally excluded in this orientation, as the improvement areas identified during SERTEC evaluations were generally followed-up by the technikons. The emphasis, however, was more on meeting the SERTEC requirements than on improving education practices and outputs. So strongly was the compliance approach entrenched that the introduction of self-evaluation reports by SERTEC (1996), as a requirement for programme accreditation, initially resulted in little more than responses to the questions of the self-evaluation framework. Self-evaluation reports at that point did not demonstrate self-critical reflection.

To its credit, SERTEC, in the late 1990's, through verbal dialogue attempted to orient technikons more toward improvement and self-regulation - an approach that corresponded with Massaro's views of a quality system (1997, p. 27). After two rounds of external evaluations of all technikon programmes over a period of eight years, many technikons were receptive to this approach, and were looking forward to a system biased more towards improvement than accountability.

Developments at national level in a sense frustrated the new approach. Central control and compliance was reintroduced by the regulations to the SAQA Act, which required the registration of all qualifications on the NQF, within the parameters set by SAQA. These included the defining of the outcomes of learning for different qualifications as nationally agreed-upon 'standards', which then formed the basis for the assessment of learners' learning achievement. Clearly, accountability and compliance was expected. On the positive side, the compliance aspect was offset by the flexibility providers had in developing learning programmes. Fixed curricula that were nationally controlled were no longer the focus, and providers had considerable freedom to design, develop, and provide them through different modes and methodologies.

In the new education approach, external quality assurance of learning programmes would be conducted by an array of external quality assurance bodies. These included those Education and Training Quality Authorities (ETQAs) for the different bands of the NQF, such as the higher-, further- and general education bands, as well as Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs), which replaced the old training boards. In addition, professional bodies or -councils could also apply to become ETQAs. The implication for technikons was that both the higher education ETQA, namely, the CHE with its executive the HEQC, as well as any SETA or any other appropriate ETQA, could potentially be involved in the quality assurance for a particular programme. Because ETQAs and SETAs are only now in the process of being established, it is too early to venture an opinion on where these bodies will stand with respect to the accountability-improvement continuum.

Institutional quality system development

The initial SERTEC quality assurance manual (1993) focussed on the provision of institutional information as basis for external evaluation through site visits. From 1996 onwards, self-evaluation, based on the provided SERTEC framework of

questions, became the requirement. Technikons were expected to provide specified information to set questions. These included the vision, mission, research, infrastructure and human resources provision, learning programme and learner achievement monitoring, assessment and moderation, the role of stakeholders, as well as an evaluation of the effectiveness of the inputs, procedures and outputs addressed in each of these areas. The self-evaluations were expected to also identify the improvements required.

Although the SERTEC manual (1996) provided an extensive framework for self-evaluation, no clear guidelines or expectations regarding quality system development were included. The result was that technikons took their cue from the evaluation framework in the manual, and in most cases, developed systems that could respond to the external requirements. The structures and strategies were, for the most, the minimum necessary to enable technikons to meet the SERTEC requirements. Self-evaluation, as a quality assurance mechanism, was periodic rather than on-going, and was often performed shortly before external evaluations. Quality assurance was thus mostly an exercise in complying with SERTEC requirements.

In 1998, SERTEC introduced the evaluation of the quality management system of an institution, as part of a form of institutional audit. Also, the programme evaluation framework was changed to include self-evaluation of the quality management mechanisms deployed to assure teaching and learning quality. This motivated technikons to review their quality systems. Many technikons engaged in exploring industry-related quality assurance models, perhaps because of the career bias of their qualifications and the strong links with industry. ISO 9000, Total Quality Management (TQM) and Business Excellence frameworks and models were some of the systems implemented by technikons.

The development of technikons' own systems led to tension between the external evaluation framework requirements and institutional self-evaluation, because the criteria of SERTEC did not accommodate the new quality system models implemented by some institutions. The SERTEC framework did not concern itself with the linkages between organisational processes and the effect these had on the core business of education and training. For those implementing TQM, these relationships were fundamental to quality management.

It became clear that a different, flexible framework, which would allow for the evaluation of an institution against its own declared quality management system model, was called for.

Programme evaluation

For technikons, the accreditation of programmes is an important way of assuring the public and industry that the qualifications gained are relevant to economic as well as employer needs, and are of a standard acceptable to and recognised by employers. The SERTEC frameworks for evaluation therefore focused on institutional controls that ensured that the approved curriculum was offered, employer- and professional-body inputs were obtained via advisory committees, and adequate controls for experiential learning were in place. Typically, also, information and data reflecting the human and material resources, and the outputs of the learning process were

required. Regarding the actual quality of teaching and learning, evidence was required that alumni, employers and current learners had evaluated the learning provision process and programme.

The 1998 SERTEC framework for self-evaluation consisted of two parts, namely, an information report and the self-evaluation report. The information framework comprised an extensive list of questions on policies, procedures and statistics about the mission, research, examinations, infrastructure, equipment, staff qualifications, curriculum, committees, client satisfaction surveys, and learner output. For academic staff the collation of the information report was both time-consuming and costly. They were of the opinion that much of the information could be made available during site visits, since evaluators were not likely to read the extensive reports compiled for every programme. The separate self-evaluation report did not elicit self-reflection, and many felt obligated to cite at least one improvement action for every question. The result was generally a very artificial reflection of the quality assurance applied in an institution.

From these experiences grew a conviction that a detailed framework should not regulate the self-evaluation report. Because the SERTEC framework guided self-evaluation via detailed questions, it did not offer opportunity for in-depth critical self-reflection narratives on what had been done, how effectively it was done, and what could be improved. Also, the relationships between processes, procedures and policies, and how these affected the achievement of the strategic goals of the institution in a programme, could not be explored. This was identified as a particular frustration. The integration of quality into strategic planning, and increasing use of management information systems to alert institutions to trends regarding the input to, processes and output of their core business, stressed the interdependence of elements of the education provision system. Mere responses to questions on input indicators and outputs did not reflect the dynamic nature of education provision and could not provide a perspective on the quality of the core business. A holistic approach, which entailed the evaluation of the education and training process, together with its supporting processes, within the framework of an institution's strategic goals, was considered more appropriate for the technikon context.

Effectiveness of the evaluation/validation visit

In the SERTEC evaluation process, evaluation committees consist of academic peers from other technikons, professional body/council representatives, employers, alumni and current learners, who typically meet for the first time on the day of the evaluation. No training, and limited orientation, of the evaluation team takes place. A guideline document is circulated before the site visit, and on the first day of the site visit, the chairperson usually orients the committee on their *modus operandi*. This is in sharp contrast to the opinion of Kells (1992, p. 104) that the success of peer review depends greatly on the training, experience and professionalism of teams.

The SERTEC procedure worked reasonably well for the first round of evaluations, since no one had previous experience of external quality assurance. As institutions gained experience in quality assurance, tensions developed. Institutions questioned the objectivity, reliability and validity of the external evaluations. Many technikons introduced industry-orientated quality assurance models, and trained evaluators who

were competent to evaluate the effectiveness of different quality assurance systems, became critical. While accreditation of programmes was still rated important and essential, the process of self-evaluation, and particularly the validation of self-evaluation, was increasingly questioned.

Norms and standards

In general, the norms set by SERTEC for learning assessment, curriculum content, minimum qualifications of academic staff, the utilisation of resource centres, and liaison with industry, were supported as minimum requirements by most technikons. In addition to these, individual technikons wanted to add those norms that they considered critical to the delivery of quality education and training. The identification of benchmarks for both operational and academic processes and the measurement of performance relative to these benchmarks, represent some of the aspects under consideration by some technikons for inclusion in the self-evaluation process.

Cost of external evaluation

For technikons, accreditation visits have been relatively inexpensive, since many members of the evaluation panels provided their services free of charge. SERTEC thus managed to serve the technikon sector on a very lean budget.

The range of career-oriented programmes offered by technikons may mean that in future a number of ETQAs and SETAs may conduct quality assurance evaluations for the purpose of programme accreditation. Depending on the period that these accreditation bodies may determine for the validity of accreditation, the cost of accreditation for technikons may be significantly higher in the future.

Summative remarks

The external quality assurance performed by SERTEC undoubtedly raised awareness about quality, quality management and, specifically, self-evaluation in technikons. It managed to establish quality assurance practices in technikons within the span of ten years. This was no small feat, considering the limited resources SERTEC had. Technikons now have quality systems, and have been exposed to external scrutiny by peers, employers and professional bodies. The fact that neither internal quality assurance nor external evaluation has been perfect does not detract from the positive influence that external quality assurance has had on the education practice in technikons.

Although accountability had initially been the point of departure for external quality assurance, follow-up and follow-through of improvement recommendations have, at the very least, raised awareness of the value of an improvement approach. Ownership of their quality systems and strategies has entrenched self-evaluation in technikons as a useful mechanism to ensure continuous improvement. The experience gained by technikons over the past ten years in terms of quality management and external quality assurance has been valuable to their development. Establishing quality management systems has been both time-consuming and costly, and institutions are only now beginning to experience the benefits of their efforts.

The positive experiences and value that preparation for accreditation brings to institutional quality efforts, and particularly the enthusiasm for external evaluation is particularly noticeable where accreditation has been newly introduced or sought for the first time (Knack, 1992). It would seem that tensions develop once familiarity with external evaluation sets in. Only after the second round of SERTEC accreditation visits did technikons begin questioning the evaluation framework, the methodology of evaluation teams and the credibility of the evaluations. It is the contention of the researcher that these tensions develop once institutions have established quality systems and are familiar with external quality assurance requirements and practices. The developing tensions should, therefore, perhaps be seen as a positive trend, as they are indicative of greater and more critical engagement with quality.

The conclusion is that the end of quality could in this context be interpreted as possibly the end to detailed directives by the external quality assurance bodies on how to perform institutional and programme self-evaluations. In practice, the detailed framework of questions, previously provided by the external quality assurance body, could be replaced by a succinct and generalised outline of the aspects that external evaluators would want to validate. Self-regulation would be the point of departure for quality assurance in an institution, and the site visits would be opportunities for constructive dialogue between institutions and accreditation bodies about possible improvements.

Implications for future external quality assurance

Kells (1992, p. 83) makes the point that external quality assurance bodies and institutions should agree on the basis for judgement in the quality assessment process, to ensure consistency and credibility. An external quality assurance body, therefore, has the difficult task of identifying such a basis and providing guidelines and evaluation frameworks that are workable for all institutions. Minimum norms regarding quality assurance are inevitable, but the external quality assurance framework or requirements could be broad and non-limiting in terms of what could be included in the self-evaluations at institutional and programme levels. The greater flexibility engendered by this approach would not inhibit validation or independent evaluation by the external quality assurance bodies, or affect the credibility of accreditation.

In the South African context, the HEQC should be mindful of the technikons' experience if continued engagement with and enthusiasm for quality assurance is to be effected. Whatever norms and frameworks the HEQC introduces, and however programme evaluation is delegated to specialist quality assurance bodies, due consideration of the past experiences of technikons with SERTEC would ensure co-operation with the external quality assurance bodies and sustain the enthusiasm for quality management.

The fact that different institutions are at different levels of development regarding quality management and the quality of their outputs, and deliver different kinds of qualifications, makes it all the more complex for the HEQC to design an agreeable basis. Massaro's (1997) proposal for a mix of approaches, based on the lessons learnt from his study of forty-eight institutions and external quality assurance agencies from

twenty-three countries, may be appropriate to the South African situation. The HEQC and other external quality assurance bodies should take a flexible stance on the accountability-improvement orientation, perhaps approaching institutions at different levels of quality assurance development from different points on the accountability-improvement continuum. Both aspects have their place, and an improvement approach does not mean that accountability for particular aspects would not be expected.

It is hoped that the end of one particular approach to external quality assurance in South Africa is the beginning of a more flexible, developmental approach by the HEQC and any other external quality assurance bodies that may be involved in the accreditation of higher education learning programmes. A balance between compliance with the norms and standards of the external quality assurance bodies, and initiatives of institutions to manage the quality of the design, development and provision of learning programmes, would empower higher education to contribute to economic and social development in South Africa.

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