The Sixth *QHE* Seminar

The End of Quality?

Birmingham, 25–26 May, 2001

QUALITY ASSURANCE IN SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION:

A NEW BEGINNING

Michael Smout and Sandra Stephenson,
Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to demonstrate that, far from being near the end, quality assurance in South African higher education is about to embark on a new beginning. A brief overview of approaches to quality assurance in South Africa up to 2000 is provided, with specific reference to the impact of the historical legacy of apartheid and the university/technikon divide. The new beginning relates to the establishment in 2001 of the country's first sector-wide external quality agency, the Higher Education Quality Committee. The challenges which face this statutory authority are critically examined.

Introduction

At the end of the twentieth century, South African higher education institutions await a pronouncement from the Minister of Education about the future size and shape of the higher education system. Notwithstanding the election of a democratic government in April 1994, and the passing of a new Higher Education Act in December of 1997 (RSA, 1997), very little of the long promised 'transformation' of the HE sector has been achieved to date. The political debates about education which date back to the African National Congress' Freedom Charter of 1955 have yet to bear fruit. All this is expected to change in early 2001 when the Minister is scheduled to outline major policy and structural changes to the higher education sector in order to achieve an integrated, unified higher education system based on the principles of equity, democratisation, development, quality, academic freedom, institutional autonomy, effectiveness and efficiency (CHE, 2000a).

This paper focuses on just one of the above principles: quality. The Higher Education Act established a statutory committee known as the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC). This committee, which has existed in interim form for two years, will be fully constituted in 2001 and several discussion documents have outlined its proposed approach

to quality issues. As the higher education sector enters a period of major restructuring, the work of the HEQC will be critical to the success of the planned new system.

This paper sets out to describe the environment within which the HEQC must function and the challenges which have to be met. As a starting point, the history of quality assurance initiatives in South Africa is reviewed in an attempt to answer the following questions. What has already been achieved? What mistakes have been made? What challenges face the HEQC? Answers to the last question lead to discussion about what can reasonably be expected of the HEQC in the three years to the end of 2003 — to the end of the first decade of ANC rule.

A brief review of the evolution of quality assurance in South African higher education

South African higher education institutions have a long tradition of 'trying to do things properly', of being concerned that graduates should be of high quality. Indeed there is evidence of this that stretches back to the first university colleges that pre-date the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910. From the earliest times one of the critical measures of output was the ability of South African university graduates to go on to higher degree work in the top universities of the United Kingdom. By contrast, however, modern quality assurance, a process that formally manages and assesses quality, is a relatively new concept in South Africa. It is perhaps no more than 12 years old in the higher education sector. For many institutions, especially in the universities, it is far more recent, maybe five years old.

Traditional approaches to ensuring 'appropriate' standards relied heavily on comment from peers and was applied mainly to the content of courses, in the external review of examination papers (normally at first degree level and upwards) and in the use of external examiners for masters and doctoral theses. Some universities insisted (and still insist) that doctoral theses should be examined by at least one authority from a recognised foreign institution. In more recent times, some of the universities set up under the Extension of University Education Act of 1959 (RSA, 1959) relied heavily on peer review of course content and extensive external examining conducted by persons from the older, more established institutions. This was in an attempt to counterbalance the frequent accusations of lower standards in such institutions.

Fortunately, the long era of political isolation that affected South Africa, did not entirely stop the flow of foreign academics to the country nor did it stop South African academics journeying abroad to attend conferences and work with foreign colleagues. Such contacts were of inestimable value in helping South Africans to stay abreast of modern trends and standards. In short, an informal but vital contribution to the quality of teaching and research in South African higher education institutions.

The period of 'traditional' approaches to quality in higher education institutions can be said to have lasted from the establishment of the first university college in 1902 until the late 1980's. During this period, wide variations in quality characterised the higher education sector and doubtless there were also wide variations in quality within institutions. The best

academic departments in the top institutions achieved standards equal to the world's best while the weakest institutions turned out some unacceptably poor graduates. The desire to achieve high quality existed, but the concept of formal quality assurance was still to be introduced.

By 1990, there were 21 universities and 15 technikons serving a population of nearly 40 million people and quality ranged widely across them reflecting their history and location. The long-established institutions, known today as the 'historically white' or 'historically advantaged' institutions are well established with considerable resources: both real estate and fixed assets. Generally, they have significant financial reserves and long-standing relationships with corporate and individual donors. Such institutions have had ample time and resources to devote to quality issues in contrast to the institutions that grew out of the Extension of University Education Act. The 'historically black' or 'historically disadvantaged' institutions, by contrast, have had much less by way of time and resources to build up their academic reputations. In some cases the newer universities and technikons were well established in terms of buildings and equipment — the things that money could buy quickly — but found it very difficult to build up the required staff complement. Over the last decade the distinction between historically white and historically black institutions has blurred as the former have taken in an increasing proportion of black students and the descriptions are no longer apposite. However there is still a distinction between advantaged and disadvantaged institutions.

From the outset, opposition to the concept of separate higher education institutions for each racial group as defined under South African law was widespread. By the mid-1970's, the demand for change in education, spearheaded by non-government organisations (NGOs), was growing rapidly. Protest was epitomised in the Soweto student uprising of 1976, which was followed by nation-wide campus protest. NGO resistance in the education sector resulted in the formation of the National Education Policy Initiative (NEPI) which produced a major report and policy framework in 1992. By this time, major political change was clearly in the offing. By 1990, when President de Klerk announced the government's intention to dismantle apartheid, the apartheid laws were being increasingly ignored by higher education institutions. By April of 1994, South Africa had a newly elected democratic government and in February of 1995, President Mandela established a National Commission for Higher Education (NCHE). The report of this commission and the legislation that followed were aimed at complete transformation of the higher education sector (NCHE, 1996).

From the NCHE report came a White Paper on Higher Education (RSA, 1997) and subsequently the higher education Act of 1997. This Act made specific provision for the management of quality via a permanent sub-committee, the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC). While the new legislation applies to the whole sector, tertiary education in South Africa is currently characterised by a binary divide between the universities and the technikons. Technikons evolved from senior technical colleges to colleges for advanced technical education in 1968, and eventually, in 1979, to technikons. They were conceived as institutions for advanced vocational learning. However, the distinction between the two types of institutions has become increasingly blurred as technological degree programmes at the bachelors, masters and doctoral level were

introduced in the technikons in 1995. In addition, universities have progressively responded to marketplace demands for more vocationally-oriented degrees, diplomas and certificates. It is anticipated that the country's new higher education landscape will attempt to eliminate this divide and establish a unified system where differentiation will be achieved through varied social and educational mandates of individual institutions.

Quality assurance in the universities

Universities only began to pay formal attention to quality assurance issues when, in January 1995, the South African Universities' Vice-Chancellors' Association (then statutorily known as the Committee of University Principals) agreed to establish a Quality Promotion Unit (QPU) which would '... assist universities to conduct productive institutional self-evaluation at different levels; and create a basis in the higher education system for accreditation of programmes for the purpose of articulation' (SAUVCA, 1997). According to the Council on Higher Education (CHE, 2000) review of the QPU in 2000, this translated into demonstrating accountability and bringing about improvement. Because of resource constraints, programme evaluation was planned as a later function of the QPU. The initial focus was to be on institutional audit based on self-evaluation and site visits by a panel of peers. The philosophy of the QPU was that of self-regulation, of quality improvement rather than quality control, of evaluating institutions against their own mission statements rather than uniform standards, and of avoiding a direct link to state funding (Stephenson, 1999). In short, the emphasis was on quality systems rather than quality *per se,* and fitness for purpose was the principal term of reference.

> Much of what was proposed was in accordance with international trends. The South African University Vice-Chancellors Association (SAUVCA) was of the view that ownership of the quality assurance system should rest with the universities rather than with the government or an independent body in order to gain acceptance by the universities and credibility with the stakeholders. (CHE, 2000, p. 23).

The main aim of the resulting QPU reports was to encourage improvement and to identify and share good practice. The QPU planned to audit all 21 public universities within three years and had undertaken two pilot audits and seven formal audits by the time the decision was taken to close the Unit in December 1999. In addition to a serious lack of resources and a highly politicised working environment, its demise was hastened by debate over its mandate and the anticipation of a much earlier start by the HEQC.

Quality assurance in the technikons

Largely in response to the technikons' desire for improved status and autonomy, the Certification Council for Technikon Education Act of 1986 (RSA, 1986) established SERTEC as an autonomous statutory body, responsible for ensuring equal standards and certification of technikon qualifications on that basis. The first Council of SERTEC was appointed in 1988 and at its first meeting, decided that its main focus would be monitoring the quality of education in the technikons. Accordingly, the legislation was amended in

1993 to recognise SERTEC as an accreditation body while the certification function was retained.

Formal monitoring of technikon standards, in the form of visiting evaluation committees, began in 1991. Each national technikon programme was evaluated in a four-year cycle and evaluation teams included representation of professional organisations and employers. Up to 50 programmes were evaluated per semester and it is estimated (Jacobs, 1999) that the headcount of persons involved in the evaluation committees approached 18000 between 1991 and 1999. Over this period, the SERTEC methodology evolved from accreditation based on compliance to accreditation based on self-evaluation, and its focus moved towards institutional rather than purely programme evaluation. By 2000, SERTEC had 'responded to a multitude of factors which included the changing dynamics within the technikon sector itself, emerging best practices elsewhere in the world, and the lessons gleaned from its own practices' (CHE, 2000b, p. 15).

However, SERTEC had established a reputation for being mechanistic and bureaucratic and the universities hoped that, like the QPU, it would also be closed and that a fresh start for the whole higher education system could be made.

Key characteristics of quality assurance in South African higher education up to 2000

The following has characterised quality assurance in South African higher education.

- The technikons emphasised accountability while the universities focused on improvement.
- SERTEC had statutory responsibilities, which gave it authority and credibility, but also resulted in a mechanistic approach, which did little to encourage improvement or promote diversity and innovation.
- the QPU evolved through a consultative process, which ensured general support, but also contributed to its floundering on issues of perceived subjectivity and political sensitivities.
- SERTEC concentrated on programme evaluation, which ensured compliance with externally set standards, but lacked a holistic assessment of each institution and its quality-management system.
- The QPU's focus on institutional evaluation resulted in some confusion as to the intention of the exercise and drew criticism from those who felt the core functions of teaching and learning were not being addressed and that quality of outcomes should be seen as more important than the effectiveness of quality management systems.
- The composition of audit panels was criticised by some as not being fully representative, adequately prepared or entirely neutral.
- Criticism of some of the reports of both SERTEC and QPU audit teams included allegations of bias, insensitivity and inconsistency. In addition, concerns were raised over the limited amount of time available for discussion during reviews as well as the focus on areas such as infrastructure at the expense of central educational issues such as teaching and learning.

- SERTEC reports were presented to institutions at the end of the site visit, which some critics felt led to crude judgements, while QPU reports in some cases were sent to institutions months after the site visit resulting in frustration and dissatisfaction within the institution visited.
- A lack of resources was a major factor in the shortcomings of both SERTEC and the QPU.
- Quality assurance of the evaluation methods utilised by both the QPU and SERTEC was seen to be lacking.

A new era for quality assurance in South Africa: 2001 onwards

The establishment of a single qualifications framework was seen by the NCHE as providing an important reference system for the proposed new quality-assurance system but it recognised that programme accreditation is by itself, an ineffective guarantee of quality. The Commission believed that a comprehensive, development-orientated, quality-assurance system is central to a single co-ordinated higher education system and essential to dealing with differences in quality across the system. The Commission further recommended that the quality-assurance process must include a self-evaluation report and that an independent body be set up to co-ordinate external evaluations, the results of which would be made public. Quality was seen to be not only an institutional matter but an essential ingredient in an emerging new relationship between the State and higher education institutions. At that early stage, the HEQC's mandate was to undertake institutional audits, accredit higher education programmes and promote quality. Included in the revised mandate were curriculum reform and the promotion of teaching and learning approaches, which are student-centred and outcomes-based.

The HEQC, which has existed in interim form for two years, will become fully constituted during 2001. A Founding Document (CHE, 2000c), released in October 2000, described its mandate as to promote quality in higher education, audit quality-assurance mechanisms, and accredit programmes. It is required to give effect to a National Qualifications Framework and is subject to the requirements of the South African Qualification Authority (SAQA). SAQA's mission is to ensure the development and implementation of the National Qualifications Framework. The Framework is a 'social construct' meant to reflect what the people want from their education system.

The National Qualifications Framework has 12 fields of knowledge and eight levels ranging from trade certificates to doctoral degrees. Within each field and level, records of learner achievement are registered as unit standards. Varying assemblies of unit standards constitute qualifications offered by 'providers' of education. SAQA has two arms, one concerned with setting (defining) standards, and the other with quality assurance. The bodies tasked with quality assurance are known as Education and Training Quality Assurors . They do not set standards, but assure their delivery by providers. The HEQC will be the Education and Training Quality Assurer for the higher education sector.

SAQA will register standards and qualifications on the National Qualifications Framework. It will not approve of learning programmes in any way as providers, including universities and technikons, will have to present their programmes to the HEQC (as the relevant Education and Training Quality Assuror) for evaluation. This process should not be confused with approval by the Minister of Education of a particular qualification offered by a specific higher education institution. Such approval only means that the minister is prepared to subsidise students taken into that course. It is quite possible for a programme to be approved by SAQA and the HEQC but for the minister to decline subsidisation of the programme.

Challenges and opportunities for the HEQC

As the HEQC gets into gear during 2001 it will face a series of challenges but will also be able to take advantage of a number of opportunities. Some of these challenges and opportunities are unique to the South African higher education landscape while others are the common experience of external quality-assurance agencies worldwide. Certain pre-requisites can be identified as critical to the success of any external quality agency and these will be examined first. Many of the issues raised in this section are complex and have already been the subject of separate papers. Limitations of time and space in this paper permit only a series of short paragraphs to create an awareness of the issues at stake. The following pre-requisites are necessary for the successful development of the process.

Adequate financial resources

There can be no doubt that financial constraints will impact on the work of the HEQC unless significant levels of donor funding are made available. The South African government is under real pressure to provide for basic needs such as housing, healthcare and primary education, and education already commands a high proportion of the total budget. Some donor funding is anticipated but it would be unwise for the HEQC to become dependent on it for recurrent expenditure. Notwithstanding financial constraints, it is anticipated that funding will be adequate for the HEQC to make a good start in 2001.

Adequate human resources

As a result of the activities of SERTEC and the QPU and the growing interest in quality assurance across the higher education sector, there is already a valuable cohort of people with expertise in quality-assurance matters. Many more people will need to be exposed to the concepts of quality assurance in higher education but existing skills levels are deemed sufficient to make a start on a national quality-assurance system for higher education. As is so often the case in South Africa, first-world legislation is not matched by first-world resources. In general terms, human resources are in short supply in higher education, due in part to the ongoing 'brain drain', but also as a result of the more lucrative salaries offered in the private sector as well as government departments.

A clear vision and the political will to make it work

The Higher Education Act has set up the HEQC as a statutory committee and the evidence to date is that the Ministry of Education has every intention of building a system that will achieve credibility within the higher education sector nationally and internationally.

Support from the higher education sector

The founding document of the HEQC has been well received by the higher education sector. It embodies international best practice in quality assurance and is also sensitive to the specific needs of South Africa. There is little doubt that there is widespread support across higher education institutions for the concepts and approach to quality-assurance espoused by the HEQC.

The ability within the higher education institutions to make quality-assurance work

Over the past five years the development of quality-assurance systems within higher education institutions has varied greatly. Some have embraced quality-assurance, making it a high priority for senior managers and allocating the necessary financial resources. Others have paid it scant attention, usually because of more pressing problems. The end result is a marked variation in the ability of higher education institutions to respond to the anticipated demands of the HEQC.

The South African higher education environment faces the following challenges.

Vast differences in quality within institutions

Given that quality-assurance is relatively new in the university sector and has not been uniformly implemented, vast differences in quality exist within institutions. In the best institutions and in the good academic departments of the weakest institutions, students regularly proceed from a South African degree to higher degree studies in top universities in the United Kingdom and the United States. Conversely, even the best South African higher education institutions have academic programmes that they cannot be proud of and at worst, some South African university degrees are not recognised by employers and professional bodies. The capabilities and level of training of South African graduates thus varies from excellent (snapped up by foreign recruiting agents) to totally unacceptable (unemployable outside the public sector). This in a nutshell, outlines the greatest single challenge facing the HEQC.

Restructuring of the higher education system

Formal quality assurance is being introduced at the same time as the entire higher education landscape is being restructured. Therefore, there is much uncertainty in the system and over the next few years restructuring will take precedence over quality assurance. On the positive side, the HEQC is faced with a 'greenfields' opportunity and quality assurance could be used to help shape and build the higher education system as a whole. The HEQC may well

assist in eliminating the binary divide given that it is the first higher education authority designed from the start to cover the entire higher education sector.

A complex historical legacy

Apartheid legislation led to the establishment of separate universities for each of the main racial groups. Most of these 'new' higher education institutions were located deep into rural areas. Often called somewhat derogatorily 'bush colleges', they were seriously disadvantaged by their location. In particular, their location in areas far from modern amenities and services, made it very difficult to draw well-qualified and experienced staff. As a result, vast differences in quality exist between institutions. The HEQC must take these variations into account as it commences its activities. It has also been suggested that effective quality assurance must take into account the ways in which higher education institutions have sought to correct the effects of prior disadvantage. The education system will bear the scars of apartheid for decades to come and the country must avoid a new form of segregation in education based on relative historical advantage.

Different interpretations of quality-assurance

The well-established binary divide between the technikons and the universities has led to vastly different approaches to quality assurance. Whereas the technikons have focussed largely on minimum standards, programme evaluation and statutory compliance, the universities favoured a developmental approach whereby self-evaluations were based on fitness for purpose and were related to institutional missions and goals. The challenge for the HEQC will be to negotiate the middle ground and to satisfy its dual goals of accountability as well as improvement: a task that international experience has shown to be fraught with pitfalls.

African allegiance

HEQC policy statements have repeatedly put international comparability high on the list but have also stressed that the country's 'African-ness' should not be forgotten. The concentration on 'fitness for purpose' must not exclude a debate on 'fitness of purpose' within higher education institutions.

Burgeoning bureaucracy

A complex bureaucracy has crept into the implementation of SAQA's vision to the extent that one witty cynic remarked that higher education had effectively been 'saqastrated'. Many academics and administrators are in the early stages of familiarity with quality-assurance principles, procedures and debates. Their perception of the potential benefits of quality assurance is unfortunately, in many cases, tainted by their experiences with the often overwhelming officialese of the SAQA steamroller. It will take a great deal of effort on the part of the HEQC to promote quality assurance as beneficial and desirable in some quarters.

Complex legislation

The introduction of parallel and in some areas conflicting legislation concerning SAQA and the HEQC has led to wrangling over turf, delays and confusion about the roles and responsibilities of each body amongst the general public and in the higher education sector. (According to the Higher Education Act, the HEQC reports to the CHE but in order to operate as an Education and Training Quality Assuror it requires to be accredited as such by SAQA).

Impact of private institutions

In line with international trends, the higher education marketplace is becoming increasingly competitive and profit-orientated. Private higher education institutions, some on-line and some foreign, have mushroomed and all are looking for new customers in an environment characterised by a declining number of matriculated school leavers. To date, such institutions have not been subject to any formal or external quality assessment and are 'presently inadequately regulated in terms of registration, accreditation and quality assurance' (CHE, 2000d, p. 21). In an environment of intense competition, the public higher education institutions will want to see that the private institutions are subject to the same quality-assurance measures. This will not only be a difficult task for HEQC, it will add hugely to its workload and strain its budget even further.

Introduction of new funding and statistical systems

In addition to restructuring, the higher education sector is faced with a completely new funding system in the near future. In parallel with this, will be a new higher education management information system through which all public institutions will report to the national department of education. Whatever the policies and concepts used to restructure higher education, the ability of a funding mechanism to influence the size and shape of a higher education system cannot be ignored. The HEQC will have to take into account the impact of the new funding system on quality issues.

Conclusion

Quality assurance in South African higher education has had a bumpy introduction and a mixed reception within the sector. However, there is no doubt that the establishment of an external quality assurance agency is long overdue, and the HEQC is a promising and welcome development.

The main challenges to be overcome in the early stages are for the HEQC to gain credibility, to take action quickly and sensitively, to develop a unified approach across the sector and to ensure adequate and ongoing funding for its activities. The HEQC should be seen to be useful, helpful and developmental. It must demonstrate the benefits of quality assurance clearly and simply and strive to develop capacity within institutions. Above all it must not be seen as a policeman. Neither should it attempt to do too much too soon: programme accreditation should be a secondary priority as it is more important to get quality-assurance systems in place at the institutional level and give these a chance to take effect.

A monumental task awaits this body but a strong cohort of capable and energetic people committed to the principles of quality assurance, along with a solid foundation and an admirable vision, bode well for the future of quality assurance in South Africa. 'The End' of quality has certainly not been reached in South African higher education. Indeed, it could be said that it is merely the beginning.

References

Council on Higher Education (CHE), 2000a, Shape and Size of Higher Education Task Team. *Towards a New Higher Education Landscape: Meeting the Equity, Quality and Social Imperatives of South Africa in the 21ˢᵗ Centur*y, June, (Pretoria, CHE).

Council on Higher Education (CHE), 2000b, Interim Higher Education Quality Committee. *An Evaluation of SERTEC and the Quality Promotion Unit* (Pretoria, CHE).

Council on Higher Education (CHE), 2000c, *Higher Education Quality Committee: Founding Document* (Pretoria, CHE).

Council on Higher Education (CHE), 2000d, *Council on Higher Education, Annual Report 1999/2000* (Pretoria, CHE).

Jacobs, D.J., 1999, 'A future quality assurance scenario for South African higher education', paper presented at the *Excellence through Self-Evaluation* Conference of the University of the Orange Free State, Bloemfontein, 1-2 September 1999.

National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE), 1996. *A Framework for Transformation: An NCHE Discussion Document* (Pretoria, Department of Education).

Republic of South Africa (RSA), 1959, *Extension of University Education Act*, No 45 of 1959. Republic of South Africa Government Gazette.

Republic of South Africa (RSA), 1986, *The Certification Council for Technikon Education Act*, No 88 of 1986. Republic of South Africa Government Gazette.

Republic of South Africa (RSA), 1997, Education White Paper 3 of 1997, *A Programme for Higher Education Transformation*. Republic of South Africa Government Gazette volume 382, Cape Town, 18 April 1997.

Republic of South Africa (RSA), 1997, *Higher Education Act*, No 101 of 1997. Republic of South Africa Government Gazette.

South African Universities' Vice-Chancellors' Association Quality Promotion Unit, 1997, *Quality Audit Manual*, Pretoria.

Stephenson, S, 1999, 'Quality assurance and academic planning: new directions for South African universities', paper delivered at the *Assessing Quality in Higher Education*, Conference, Manchester, England, July 1999.