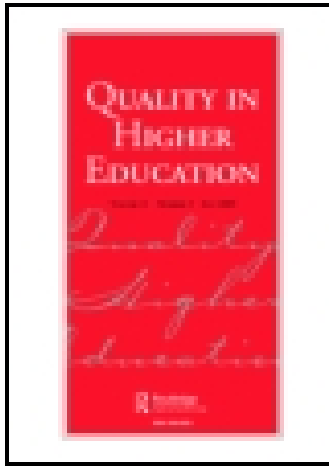


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A Case Study of an Institutional Audit: A Social Realist Account

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ABSTRACT *Since 1994, the South African higher education system, fragmented and divided along racial lines during the years of apartheid, has been subject to a wide range of initiatives directed at bringing about the 'transformation' necessary for a more equitable dispensation and, ultimately, a new social order. One of the 'levers' being used in transformation processes is quality assurance. The paper uses a case study of an institutional audit at one historically white, élite South African university to provide a social realist account of an audit process and to analyse the likelihood of the audit contributing to institutional transformation. A conclusion is that the South African audit methodology per se is unlikely to bring about the change necessary because of its tendency to focus on the mechanistic implementation of recommendations.*

Keywords: institutional audit; quality assurance; transformation

Introduction

Given the enormity of the shift from apartheid to democracy, it is not surprising that, for some years now, any discussion of South Africa's higher education system has tended to be dominated by the word 'transformation'. In 1994, the newly elected democratic government inherited a higher education system that was fragmented along a number of lines. Most obvious was the split along the lines of race since the apartheid government had devised a system intended to meet the 'needs' of the different race groups in South Africa. Divisions along other lines, including language and institutional purpose, were equally problematic. Although enormous changes at institutional and system levels have taken place (Cooper & Subotsky, 2002; Cloete *et al.*, 2002), much still remains to be done.

As many writers have pointed out, the origins of quality assurance in higher education lie in globalisation (Vroeijsenstijn, 1995) and in reductions in funding for public institutions associated with neo-liberalism (Barnett, 1992). Depending on context, quality assurance has been associated with the need to assure and develop quality in the face of the rapid expansion of higher education systems, the broadening of the purposes of higher education and the need for increased accountability for public spending. While all these arguments for

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quality assurance apply to the South African higher education system, an even more important justification for its introduction relates to the idea of 'transformation' mentioned previously. Quality assurance is widely acknowledged as one of the 'levers' (Jansen, 2001) that can contribute to this transformation. In the South African context, therefore, the first round of institutional audits currently being conducted by the national quality assurance agency, the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC), is highly significant at social, political and economic levels.

This paper uses the case of an audit at one historically white, élite, English medium institution to argue that the South African audit methodology *per se* is unlikely to bring about the institutional change necessary for 'transformation' because of its tendency to focus on the mechanistic implementation of recommendations. It then goes on to argue that meaningful change is dependent on the adoption of a theoretical framework that will allow the institution and the quality assurance agency, to understand the causal mechanisms that give rise to the empirical conditions and events that are identified by the audit panel and that need to be addressed by recommendations made in the audit report. In practice, this means that the conditions within the institution need to be analysed using the concepts of culture, structure and agency. A methodological framework developed by Archer (1995, 1996, 1998) is then offered as a means of investigating the interface between culture, structure and agency in order to theorise about the conditions that enable or constrain institutional transformation.

Context

Like many countries elsewhere in the world, South Africa's approach to quality assurance is dependent on understandings of quality as fitness for and of purpose. In the South African context, the ideas of fitness for and fitness of purpose are intricately linked to the construct of 'transformation'⁽¹⁾ as the higher education system seeks to adapt to changed social, political and economic orders at a national level and, at the same time, to changes at wider levels because of the impact of globalisation. The approach to audit is reliant on a methodology involving the production of a self evaluation portfolio, in that the institution reflects on its purpose and the extent to which it is fit for that purpose (using a number of criteria as a basis for the reflective exercise), that is validated or challenged by an audit panel comprised of peers from other institutions and at least one international auditor. Following the production of the self-evaluation portfolio, the audit process comprises an audit visit and an audit report focusing on recommendations and commendations. The institution is then invited to respond to the audit report through the development of a quality improvement plan with the quality assurance agency later checking on progress made against the plan. Ideally, an audit process would not take longer than one year from the production of the self-evaluation portfolio to the submission of the quality improvement plan.

Because of the potentially sensitive nature of South African audit processes in the face of the need to contribute to transformation, enormous effort is expended on the preparation and training of audit panels. For the same reasons, audit processes also emphasise the need for judgements to be substantiated by empirical evidence. Verbatim records are kept of all interviews conducted during the audit processes and these, along with documentary evidence, are used to support the recommendations and commendations made in audit reports. However, as in all social contexts, it must be recognised that audit judgements are constructed: a point that is taken up by the methodological framework on which this article is based.

Archer's methodological framework

Critical realist philosopher, Roy Bhaskar (1979), identified three ontological layers: the empirical, the actual and the real. For Bhaskar, the real, the deepest layer of reality, consisted of underlying structures and causal mechanisms that give rise to the events in the world. The second layer, the actual, is then identified as the domain of events: what actually happens when underlying structures and causal mechanisms are activated. The empirical layer then consists of commonsense experience: what we know and observe through the senses. Our understanding of the empirical is thus fallible because of its constructed nature.

In a previous critique of South African quality assurance mechanisms, Luckett (2007, p. 7), who also adopts a critical realist position, argued that the 'flat ontology' of the audit methodology, which essentially operates only at the level of the empirical, 'fails to penetrate the level of the real and uncover the workings of social structure and social agency'. The account provided by an audit process is thus partial, potentially fallible, and does not necessarily have the power to bring about the change envisaged by those who developed it.

The aim of this paper is to acknowledge Luckett's critique but also to respond to it by arguing that an analysis of an audit process using Archer's (1995) social realist methodological framework (which is itself based on Bhaskar's critical realist ontology) could contribute to the potential of the audit process to bring about change. In other words we are arguing that the audit methodology *per se* is insufficient to bring about institutional change through the mechanistic implementation of recommendations and that meaningful change is dependent on the adoption of a theoretical framework that will allow the institution, and the quality assurance agency, to understand the causal mechanisms that give rise to the empirical conditions and events that are identified by the audit panel and that need to be addressed by recommendations made in the audit report. In practice, this entails using the concepts of culture, structure and agency to analyse the conditions within a specific institution. The paper argues this position by using a case study of an audit process at one institution, the Small South African University (SSAU), in order to identify how the audit process interacts with other factors identified by Archer (1995) as being implicated in morphogenesis (change) and morphostasis (staying the same). In the context of the paper, the analysis is necessarily partial because of the constraints of space. The elements of the case study examined in the paper should therefore be understood as exemplars only. In spite of these caveats, the aim of the paper is to offer a theoretical framework that will allow those working in other contexts to develop the potential of institutional audit processes to *enhance* and not merely assure quality.

According to Archer (1995, 1996), examination of structure, culture and agency is central to any study of the social world. Archer understands structure to refer to material interests, to recurring patterns of social behaviour or to the interrelationship between different elements of society whereas culture is about ideas, beliefs, values, and ideologies. Both are important aspects of social life; they are parallel yet different from each other and autonomous. The term agency is often juxtaposed to structure and is used to refer to the psychological and social psychological make-up of the human actor, and to imply the capacity that people have for voluntary action. The theoretical tendency in sociology in both the structural and cultural domains has been to conflate or elide the 'parts' and the 'people'. Archer argued against what she called the 'Fallacy of Conflation' (Archer, 1996, p. xv); both the conflation of structure and agency and of culture and agency. Archer's theory is one that is 'capable of linking "structure and agency" or "culture and agency", rather than sinking the difference between the "parts" (organisational or ideational) and the "people", who

hold the positions or ideas within them' (Archer, 1996, p. xiv). Culture, structure and agency are viewed as separate strata of reality, each with distinct properties and powers. Both culture and structure are regarded as central to social life and, although they are substantially different, it is Archer's contention that the same conceptual, theoretical and analytical framework can be used to investigate both and also to investigate the interplay between culture and agency and structure and agency. Archer's (1996) morphogenetic–morphostatic framework then provides a methodology that allows researchers to advance concrete propositions about how the normative ideas (and their associated discourses) and the material structures related to a particular field (for example, higher education) at the macro level shape the ideas or discourses and material structures at mezzo and micro levels, and then how the people in these contexts respond to these conditioning influences. Because structure, culture and agency are unified within the same conceptual framework, it paves the way for uniting them analytically and theorising about their relationship. Importantly, it also enables the researcher to determine *when* one exerts more influence over the other.

More simply, Archer's framework enables a researcher to account for how and why things have either changed (elaborated) or stayed the same (reproduced). The potential of the framework as a heuristic for understanding the outcomes of audit processes in a context characterised by the need for transformation is immediately apparent.

Morphogenesis occurs in endless three-part cycles consisting of: structural/cultural conditioning → social/socio-cultural interaction → structural/cultural elaboration (see Figures 1 and 2). Archer's claim is that this methodology is capable of allowing a researcher to unravel the dialectical interplay between structure and agency and between cultural and agency over time.

Morphostasis occurs in the same three-part cycles as morphogenesis. However, the result is structural and cultural *reproduction* rather than elaboration (or change).

To examine a morphogenetic cycle of any nature, it is necessary to understand that the starting point (T^1 as present time) is always situated historically; is always 'conditioned' by history: '[f]or we are all born into and can only live embedded in an ideational [and structural] context that is not of our making' (Archer, 1996, p. xxv). Archer talks about 'structural and cultural conditioning' avoiding the use of 'determining' because that would imply no agency and she argues that agents possess their own emergent properties and powers (Archer, 1995, p. 90). To begin to understand any particular morphogenetic cycle it is necessary to begin with an examination of how things came to be (in both the cultural and the

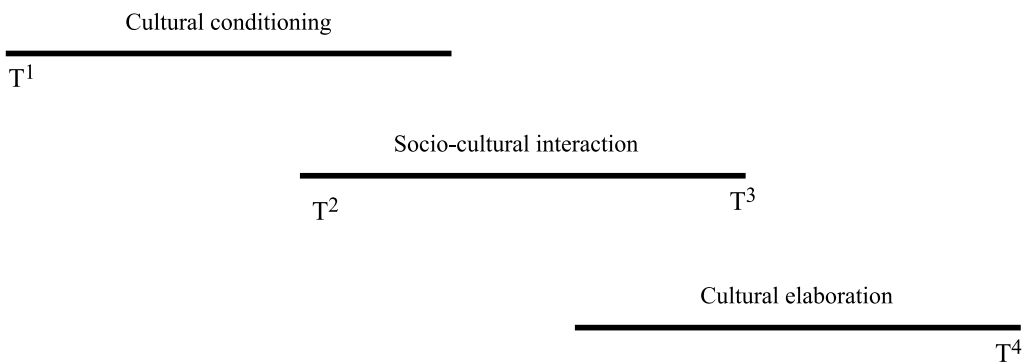


FIGURE 1. The morphogenesis of culture (Archer, 1995, p. 193)

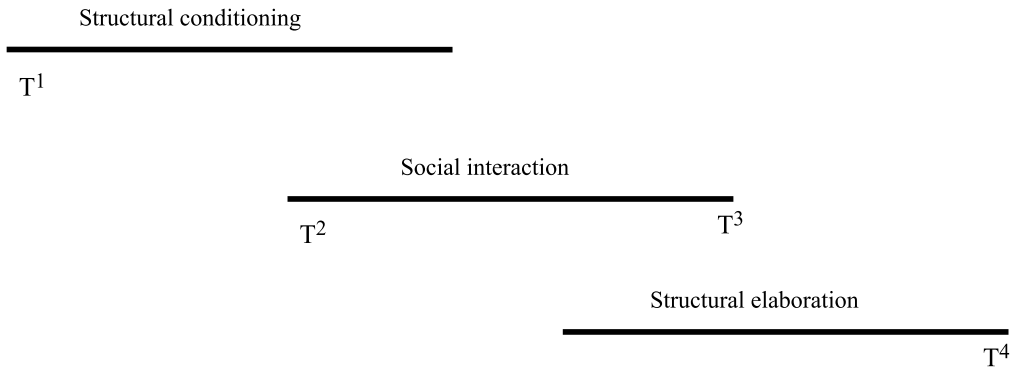


FIGURE 2. The morphogenesis of structure (Archer, 1995, p. 193)

structural domains); what they are at the present time. In audit processes, such an examination can be achieved through an analysis of the self-evaluation report.

T² to T³ is an analysis of how individuals and groups of people (depending on the positions they occupy) respond to inherited constraining or enabling structural and cultural contexts. In the words of Carter and New (2004, p. 6), '[p]eople choose what they do, but they make their choices from a structurally and culturally generated range of options—which they do *not* choose'. If the result of this agential interaction is morphogenesis (change) as opposed to morphostasis (staying the same) then the likely result is that of 'elaboration' of the structural or cultural systems (T⁴).^[2] This elaboration is seen as being a mostly unintended consequence of action (given the non-predictability of change in open systems). The T⁴ of the present cycle becomes the T¹ in the next morphogenetic cycle and becomes a new conditional influence on subsequent action. The morphogenetic/static framework is thus useful as it allows a researcher to observe when transformation occurs and when reproduction occurs and also the conditions under which each is possible or not possible (Archer, 1995, p. 140).

The case of Small South African University

The case of SSAU will be analysed using the morphogenetic–morphostatic cycle. The analysis will begin with the production of the institution's self evaluation portfolio (represented as T¹ in Figures 1 and 2). Aspects of the portfolio will then be examined as a means of identifying how things came to be: in this case how the institution describes the procedures (which, in Bhaskarian terms, exist at the level of the empirical) used in order to ensure fitness for and of purpose. The socio-cultural and social interaction depicted as T² to T³ in Figures 1 and 2 is then understood to consist of interaction with the audit panel and audit processes. The position at T⁴, consisting either of structural/cultural elaboration or reproduction is then understood to be the result of the audit processes. In the South African context of the need for institutions to transform themselves in order to meet the needs of a new social order, then clearly the desired outcome at T⁴ is structural/cultural elaboration (change). The advantage of Archer's theoretical framework, as already noted, is that it has the potential to allow for an understanding of how and why elaboration does or does not take place and for actions then to be taken to promote change. In the context of the possibility of taking action to promote change, the framework allows for an analysis of the extent to which structural, cultural or agential conditions have been more significant in enabling or constraining change.

T¹: structural and cultural conditioning at SSAU

SSAU is categorised as a historically white, English-medium university (one of the so-called 'liberal universities') that ostensibly did not support apartheid policies but that were nonetheless dependent on government funding under apartheid (Bunting, 2002). According to Bunting (2002, p. 73; citing Mamdani, 1998), universities like SSAU 'were never major agents for social and political change in South Africa, despite the anti-apartheid stance they had adopted'. Instead they were 'islands of white social privilege'. The roots of the English-medium universities in European cultural traditions also have to be acknowledged. Von Kotze (2006, p. 5), with reference to another South African higher education institution that has a similar history to that of SSAU, pointed out that:

Our universities have been attempts to reproduce European institutions in order to reproduce European culture, social structures, beliefs and values. We have operated as poor copies of Oxbridge and Harvard, and by maintaining the superiority of western knowledge discourses, we have failed to concede that such knowledge is partial.

Following the first democratic election in 1994, universities such as SSAU were forced to respond to the agenda for transformation at a national level. The most typical response took the form of admitting larger numbers of black students. This structural response to cultural and structural conditions at a more macro level was not matched, however, by changes in the cultural conditions at SSAU. This is acknowledged in the self-evaluation portfolio prepared by SSAU for audit purposes:

It is well recognized that some aspects of the institutional culture may be perceived by some staff, students and other stakeholders to be alienating or even hostile. Further, it is in the long established institutions that such cultures are deeply embedded and difficult to change. SSAU is well aware of this situation and of the need to adopt a proactive approach to its mission statement which states that the University undertakes to develop shared values which embrace basic human and civil rights; acknowledge and be sensitive to the problems created by the legacy of apartheid, to reject all forms of unfair discrimination and to ensure that appropriate corrective measures are employed to address past imbalances. (SSAU, 2005, pp. 11–12)

In the context of Archer's framework, therefore, what would appear to be key is whether the conditions for cultural morphogenesis could emerge as a result of the audit.

At a structural level, SSAU at T¹ was also characterised by a management system based on collegiality and trust and that was thus informed by shared cultural assumptions. The self-evaluation portfolio, for example, notes that: '[a]ll students and staff enjoy easy access to senior managers and an "open door" policy is characteristic of the institution's management style' (SSAU, 2005, p. 7). While an open door policy might have been a characteristic of institutional structuring, however, it is arguably the case that taking advantage of open doors was dependent on accessing dominant culture and on exercise of agency. The self-evaluation portfolio goes on to note (citing the size of the university) that 'a high proportion [of staff] sit on Faculty committees and Faculty Boards which report in turn to the Senate sub-committees and Senate'. While open access to committee, faculty and institutional

structures might have been a feature of the institution, effecting that access was also arguably dependent on shared cultural assumptions and on exercising agency.

Examination of the self-evaluation portfolio submitted by SSAU as part of the audit processes reveals a strong discourse^[3] centred on the idea of quality as 'excellence'. In this discourse, fitness for and of purpose revolves around the idea of SSAU being 'excellent'. The portfolio notes, for example, that the university is 'committed to striving for excellence' (SSAU, 2005, p. 16), that '[t]o promote excellence in teaching and learning the University provides its staff with access to academic development opportunities' (SSAU, 2005, p. 8) and that '[t]he promotion of excellence in research forms part of the institutional mission' (SSAU, 2005, p. 9). The university's mission and vision statement is then cited to provide a definition of 'excellence' as 'being an internationally respected academic institution, affirming its African identity, producing internationally recognised graduates and making a contribution to the advancement of international scholarship and to the development of the [province] and South Africa' (SSAU, 2005, p. 9).

Von Kotze (2006, p. 12; citing Readings, 1996) made similar observations about the use of the 'excellence' discourse at another historically white higher education institution in South Africa noting that:

A particular notion of excellence has been bestowed upon us, and every time we use it to describe or appraise we show that we have embraced it, often uncritically and unreflectively. The neo-liberal economic framework defines 'excellence' in terms of contributions towards mainstream knowledge systems that benefit primarily the elite.

In the SSAU self-evaluation portfolio, the 'excellence' discourse is then substantiated by claims related to products or outputs. The portfolio notes, for example, that 'SSAU has the best annual research output *per capita* of all the universities in South Africa' (SSAU, 2005, p. 9). Analysis of these research outputs, however, allows questions to be raised about who is doing the research and what sort of research is being done: questions that are relevant to the construct of transformation in the South African context. In many respects, then, the discourse of 'excellence', evident in the self-evaluation portfolio, serves to maintain the *status quo* at the institution; if the structural and cultural conditions that pertain at T¹ are sufficient to ensure excellence, why should they be transformed? Although critical questions were raised during the visit of the audit panel, the first cycle of the morphogenetic–morphostatic cycle involving a process of self reflection and analysis in the audit process (from T¹ to T²) does not appear to have been conducive to effecting change. This is an important observation in the context of the question of whether audit *processes* are sufficient to bring about change.

T²–T³: socio-cultural and social interaction at SSAU

As already noted, the self reflection intended to have been promoted through the production of a self-evaluation portfolio does not appear to have occurred at SSAU largely because of the dominance of a discourse constructing the institution as 'excellent' and, concomitantly, not in need of change. The lack of self-reflection was also undoubtedly due to the actions of powerful agents involved in the production of the self-evaluation portfolio and to the assumption that everyone in the institution valued the dominant culture. The visit by an audit panel offered an opportunity for panel members to engage with staff

members and students around the self-evaluation portfolio and resulted in the production of an audit report. In Archerian terms, therefore, T^2 – T^3 spans the time between the audit visit and the production of the institution's quality improvement plan and involves interaction between panel members and the institution and interaction between agents in the institution itself.

It is probably fair to say that the visit by the audit panel was characterised by a degree of discomfort in the institution as dominant assumptions and claims were interrogated and challenged in interviews. The audit visit therefore constituted a time when dominant discourses giving rise to the cultural and structural conditions evident at T^1 (in Archerian terms, a mechanism at the level of the real) were destabilised. The extent to which this destabilisation (brought about by audit processes or *methodology*) was ineffective in prompting change can be seen in the restabilisation of those discourses once the panel had left the campus. That discourses did restabilise themselves is evident in SSAU's response to the audit panel's draft report. South African audit processes require that a draft report should be submitted to the institution so that factual inaccuracies can be corrected. At SSAU, the draft report elicited a challenge to the overall findings of the audit panel, initially written up in the form of a defensive response to the report, but which later was not submitted to the quality assurance agency. Evidence of discourses that characterise the structural and cultural conditioning at T^1 abounds in this document. It would appear, then, that the audit *methodology* was not successful in challenging dominant cultural conditions to the extent needed to bring about change.

Using Archer's (1995) framework, it is at the point of the response to the draft audit report that the interplay of structure and agency also becomes significant. As already noted, South African audit processes require institutions only to comment on factual inaccuracies in the draft audit report. At SSAU, key agents in the institution took it upon themselves to draft a more comprehensive response to the report. At the same time, however, the intervention of one more key agent resulted in that response being tempered through the 're-destabilisation' of dominant discourses and, eventually, in it not being submitted to the quality assurance agency. The actions of the key agents cannot be accounted for by audit processes—the audit *methodology* is therefore incapable of managing agential responses that may prompt or constrain change.

Following audit criteria, recommendations in the final audit report are made in five main areas: (1) institutional mission; (2) institutional planning, resource allocation and quality management; (3) general arrangements for teaching and learning quality; (4) management of research quality; and (5) management of the quality of community engagement. In the area of institutional mission, the report notes, for example, that SSAU's:

...understanding of excellence is strongly associated with international recognition. According to its vision, SSAU strives to be an internationally respected institution. This is translated into the mission of producing 'internationally accredited graduates'. Similarly, the idea of excellence in research and in teaching suggests that 'excellence' and 'internationalisation' are complementary concepts for SSAU's management, academic staff and students. (HEQC, 2005, p. 11)

This observation then leads to the recommendation that the institution should:

...foster wide debate at the University on how internationalisation could be given expression in the different core functions, and how it could be made compatible

with local and regional objectives and the African identity signalled in the institution's mission and vision. (HEQC, 2005, p. 12)

An analysis of the recommendations shows that in six of the 19 recommendations there are explicit references to 'culture'. These are reflected in phrases such as: 'institution-wide debate'; 'development of a fuller conceptual framework...'; 'foster wide-debate'; 'engage with the issue of how...'; 'actively engage with...'; 'a reconceptualisation of...'; 'review its current arrangements for...'; and 'review the identity, functions, and resourcing...'.

However, the analysis further shows that even the recommendations that directly address structure are underpinned by a need to work at the level of culture. For example one of the recommendations is that the university should give 'urgent attention to its emerging policies on staff equity [involving] the development of an integrated plan ...' (HEQC, 2005, p. 14). For this to happen in an institution characterised by a white, middle-class culture, changes at the level of culture would need to occur.

In the context of the concerns raised in this paper, it is argued that, following Archer (1996) the focus of institutional activity at T³ should be the interface between the structural and cultural systems. In other words, the institution needs to examine the ideas, beliefs, ideologies, values and theories prevalent at T1 if change is to occur. The importance of this point is substantiated by Table 1, which analyses recommendations and shows how, in all cases, changes to structure need to be underpinned by changes at the level of culture. In Table 1, recommendations are marked with inverted commas. The analysis of the cultural changes that would need to occur for the structural changes recommended by the audit report to be meaningful appears in italics (see Table 1).

At SSAU, the receipt of the audit report coincided with the appointment of a new vice-chancellor. For Archer, there is a difference between roles and the people who occupy those roles: 'some roles are personified in routinised ways while others can be cumulatively transformed in the hands of their incumbents' (Archer, 1995, p. 187). As Archer (1995) points out, actors endow the roles with their own ideals, skills, knowledge and values. This was certainly the case at SSAU where the new vice-chancellor brought a history of activism and experience of wider South African society to the post. As a result of the appointment, the production of the quality improvement plan (noted as part of the audit methodology) earlier in this paper, was postponed so that its production could be included in wider processes aimed at institutional development. The delay in the production of the quality improvement plan needs to be understood as the exercise of agency. The exercising of this agency then ensured that the plan, developed in 2008, was contextualised within wider debates regarding the future of the institution and within other structural changes that resulted from the vice-chancellor's agency.

Because of his background and experience, the new vice-chancellor has used his powerful position to challenge dominant assumptions at SSAU and to 'accentuate' (Archer, 1995, p. 39) ideas and values related to transformation. Key individuals can influence how others respond to structures and, ultimately, influence whether the structures can have an effect on institutional transformation (or in Archerian terms, lead to elaboration). This has undoubtedly been the case at SSAU. In the context of the audit methodology, however, the appointment of the new vice-chancellor was fortuitous: without this appointment it is questionable whether elaboration would have been possible to the extent it has.

The quality improvement plan developed at SSAU focuses on a number of 'outcomes' identified in response to the recommendations made in the audit report. A summary of these outcomes appears as Appendix 1. Perusal of these outcomes shows that the majority

TABLE 1. Analysis of recommendations

Recommendation	Culture	Structure
1	'...initiat[e] institution-wide debate about the liberal arts tradition in order to contextualise its value and currency in South Africa...'	
2	'...give continuing attention to the development of a fuller conceptual framework for internationalisation, foster wide debate... on how it could be made compatible with local and regional objectives and the African identity signalled in the institution's mission and vision.'	
3	<i>Underpinning cultural assumptions related to who is employable need to be addressed.</i>	'...in order to accelerate improvement in its redress and equity profile, [the institution] develop a recruitment strategy... resources and mechanisms... to achieve targets.'
4	<i>Acknowledge lack of equity in staff profile, acknowledge that this can be addressed rather than excused.</i>	'...give urgent attention to University's emerging policies on staff equity. This would entail the development of an integrated equity plan...'
5	'Consider the development of a bold and transparent strategy to address negative aspects of its institutional culture.'	'[Develop] clear monitoring mechanisms to track progress'
6	'...engage with the issue of how, within a decentralised system of quality management... [the University] could actively engage with and give expression to achievement of institutional level objectives.'	
7	'Consider within its framework of collegial governance, a reconceptualisation of quality management to give greater weight to quality support, development and monitoring as strategic tools for achievement of institutional level objectives.'	
8	<i>Acknowledge and accept need for more 'managed' strategic planning.</i>	'...identification and use of a set of performance indicators that could reinforce the institution's planning & quality management functions, and explore the utilisation of suitable benchmarking tools in a formalised and regular manner to support decision making for academic planning & quality improvement.'
9	<i>Challenge to the discourse of excellence, acknowledge need for development to ensure that teaching and learning is appropriate and 'fit for purpose'.</i>	'...review its current arrangements for monitoring implementation of teaching & learning policies to enable the institution to ensure that high quality teaching is consistently offered... Appropriate developmental initiatives are in place where required...'

TABLE 1. (Continued)

Recommendation	Culture	Structure
10	<i>Acknowledgement of need for more managed institutional environment. Acknowledgement of way structure and culture can impact on difference. Exploration of construct of 'disadvantage'.</i>	'...develop and implement appropriate mechanisms to monitor and assess the effectiveness of the Extended Studies Unit... document ways in that extended programmes contribute to the throughput and success rates of different groups of students in different disciplines.'
11	<i>Acknowledgement of need for more managed institutional environment. Need to view evaluation as form of research aimed at ongoing improvement.</i>	'...explore an appropriate mechanism to monitor the effectiveness of its voluntarist approach to the evaluation of teaching and learning.'
12	<i>Acknowledge valuing work in higher education studies and researched approach to teaching and learning.</i>	'...review the identity, functions and resourcing of the ADC... review of its relationships with the university's central academic planning structures and the senior leadership responsible for teaching and learning.'
13	<i>Acknowledgement of need for more managed institutional environment. Acknowledge value of peer review in enhancing quality. Challenge to discourse of excellence.</i>	'...formalise its policy on external examinations and ensure that the systems needed to monitor and respond to external examiner reports are effective in achieving effective and consistent management.'
14	<i>Acknowledgement of need for more managed institutional environment to ensure that purpose is achieved. Consider identity of institution (liberal arts versus research intensive). Acknowledgement of need for researchers to be consciously developed.</i>	'...development of a strategy for the expansion of the research function that takes into account the current research profile of the University.'
15	<i>Acknowledgement of need for more managed institutional environment. Acknowledgement of need for researchers to be consciously developed. Questioning of equity profile.</i>	'...consider the development of a comprehensive strategy to recruit new researchers and increase the number of research outputs. The strategy should take into account the urgent need to change the demographics of research production.'
16	<i>Acknowledgement of need for more managed institutional environment. Challenge to the discourse of excellence. Questioning of equity profile.</i>	'...develop a recruitment strategy for postgraduate students that takes into account the disciplinary areas prioritised by the institution and the consequences this might have for [institutional] identity as a liberal arts college, unevenness in research production across departments and the need to change the University's equity profile. Such a strategy will need to be regularly monitored and appropriately resourced.'
17	<i>Acknowledge valuing work in higher education studies and researched approach to teaching and learning.</i>	'...increasing of support for those activities of the ADC that are focused on the development of generic competencies and skills of postgraduate students.'

TABLE 1. (Continued)

Recommendation	Culture	Structure
18	Consider fairness as an element of assessment practice.	'...making international external examiners a requirement for PhDs, and create a procedure for appeals in the process of the examination of postgraduate degrees within the institution.'
19	Engagement with the differences between community engagement, service learning and voluntarism and how this relates to the University's mission & vision.	'...develop suitable mechanisms for the quality management of the community engagement core functions.'

are structural and here lies the danger in audit methodology. As the analysis of the recommendations in the SSAU audit report showed, structures need to be underpinned by change at the level of culture. In addition, key agents have the power to influence the ideas and values that will lead to change. If the response of an institution is only to identify structural change without acknowledging the need to address culture and if an institution does not have key agents in place to 'accentuate' the change needed, then it is unlikely that the meaningful change needed for transformation will occur.

At SSAU, the appointment of the new vice-chancellor (arguably the person with the most potential to be the key agent at any university) resulted in a number of changes to management structures. For example, a single vice-principal position was replaced by two deputy vice-chancellor posts each carrying responsibility for key areas of strategic management. In addition, other key posts were created at lower levels of the institution including, for example, the posts of dean: teaching and learning and director: community engagement. Sewell (1992) points out that structures empower agents differentially and that agency can be collective or individual. The effect of the changes made by the new vice-chancellor has been to create more collective agency in the top management structures of the institution.

The new vice-chancellor has also made a number of attempts to encourage the institution to reflect on its dominant culture at *imbizos*^[4] and other meetings and through the production of key documents and it would probably be fair to say that dominant discourses related to 'excellence', noted earlier as being 'anti-transformational' at SSAU, have been challenged substantially. The collective agency noted previously now has the potential of supporting these challenges to the dominant culture even further. However, an Archerian approach would require research of later morphogenetic–morphostatic cycles to discern the effect of the collective.

The quality improvement plan developed at SSAU does acknowledge the structural changes that have taken place at the institution (most particularly the assignation of agency to key individuals) and the challenges to dominant culture made by the new vice-chancellor. The addressing of culture and agency is not a feature of audit methodology, however, and the space remains for institutions merely to respond to an audit at the level of structure.

If this happens, as Trow (1994, p. 20; cited in D'Andrea & Gosling, 2001, p. 3) pointed out:

The paradoxical result may well be that vigorous efforts by agencies and central government to assess the quality of university work lead to its decline as more and more energy is spent on bureaucratic reports and as universities begin to adapt to the simplifying tendencies of the quantification of outputs.

Conclusion

The present paper has argued that the social realist metatheoretical framework and in particular, Archer's morphogenetic–morphostatic methodological approach provides for an understanding of the necessary conditions for change to be developed in audit processes. In the South African context, the approach thus has the potential to interact with current audit methodologies to enhance the possibility of change for the better. It does this because it allows those involved in the audit (and this should include institutional actors, audit panels and officials of the quality assurance agency) to analyse data in such a way that they are able to advance an argument for the conditions (structural, cultural and agential) under which change is possible at a particular time in history.

The social realist approach encourages researchers to look beyond or beneath the immediately observable empirical level of reality; beyond what Archer (1995, p. 50) called the 'hard data supplied by our senses'. It enables an investigation of deeper levels of reality and the uncovering of the underlying causal processes, structures and powers that enable or constrain the phenomenon or phenomena under investigation. Archer's non-conflationary framework, based on the principle of analytical dualism, allows the conditioning effects of culture, structure and agency on events and practices to be separated and examined. It enables an examination of the interplay between culture and structure and between culture and agency and structure and agency, that is, the effects of the systemic (parts) on social life (people). Findings from such examination can potentially provide those engaged in audits with more valid and reliable understandings of the processes involved in change.

In the case of SSAU, this means that the analysis has identified the insufficiency of the structural changes identified as deliverables in the quality improvement plan and has accentuated the need for increased work at the level of culture and for a focus on the role of key actors in this process. For, as Archer (1995, p. 324) noted:

...where any form of Social Elaboration is concerned, then structure, culture and agency are always involved. The investigative focus may be on one alone, but the investigation itself cannot fail to introduce the other two.

As noted earlier in this paper, the advantage of Archer's theoretical framework is that it has the potential to allow for an understanding of how and why elaboration does or does not take place and for actions then to be taken to promote change. Luckett (2007, p. 10) argued that: 'whilst current pragmatic, judgement orientated, models of quality assurance may be useful for checking that certain inputs, processes and outputs are in place, they do not have the methodological capacity to effect long-term continuous improvement or radical change'. Luckett thus argues that a focus only on structure is unlikely to bring about change. However, as shown in the case study presented in this paper, an analysis of the outcomes of an audit process at the level of structure, culture and agency has the potential for actions that can promote change to be identified.

Notes

- [1] Editor's note: transformation in the South African context has political and social connotations and should not be confused with the transformation definition of quality, which is an alternative to fitness for purpose; see editorial in Volume 1, Issue 1 of *Quality in Higher Education*.
- [2] ... a Cultural System is held to be roughly co-terminous with what Popper called Third World Knowledge. At any given time a Cultural System is constituted of the corpus of existing intelligibilia—by all things capable of being grasped, deciphered, understood or known by someone. ...By definition the cultural intelligibilia form a system, for all items must be expressed in a common language (or must be translatable in principle) since this is a precondition of their being intelligible (Archer 1995, p. 179; Archer 1996, p. 104).
- [3] Johnstone (2002, p. 3), influenced by Foucault, describes discourses as:
...conventional ways of talking that both create and are created by conventional ways of thinking. These linked ways of thinking constitute ideologies... and serve to circulate power in society... [they] involve patterns of belief and habitual action as well as patterns of language. Discourses are ideas as well as ways of talking that influence and are influenced by the ideas...
- [4] *Imbizo* is a Zulu word, meaning gathering or convocation, commonly used to describe a forum for enhancing dialogue and interaction between institutional leadership and the people.

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APPENDIX 1. Outcomes of the quality improvement plan developed at SSAU

No.	Outcome
1	Revised international policy and associated implementation strategies
2	Access and admissions policy and associated implementation strategies
3	Finalisation of the proposed equity plan
4	Proposal for the preparation of members of designated groups for personal promotion
5	Implementation of the 'where leaders learn' project
6	New quality management framework
7	Finalisation of the mandate for the institutional planning unit
8	Review of roles of quality assurance and teaching and learning committees
9	Development of a set of performance indicators
10	Revised format for statistical digest
11	Revised policies on teaching and learning
12	Identification of a route for deans' reporting on external examining
13	Research plan and associated implementation strategies
14	Emerging researchers plan and associated implementation strategies
15	Focused enrolment targets in growth areas identified through 'size and shape' (linked to development of performance indicators)
16	Memorandum between research office and CHERTL related to the development to postgraduate students
17	Appeals procedure for postgraduate degrees
18	Framework for community engagement