

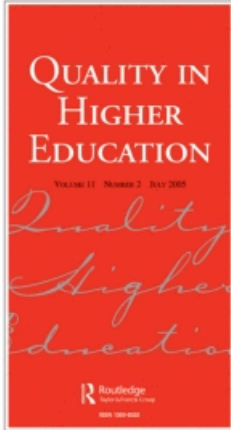
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Magda Fourie^a; Heinrich Alt^a

^a Unit for Research into Higher Education, University of the Orange Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa

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Challenges to Sustaining and Enhancing Quality of Teaching and Learning in South African Universities

MAGDA FOURIE & HEINRICH ALT

Unit for Research into Higher Education, University of the Orange Free State, PO Box 4345, Bloemfontein 9300, South Africa

ABSTRACT *The challenges to sustain and enhance the quality of teaching and learning facing academic staff in South African universities are discussed against the background of the latest quality assurance policy developments at the national level. In addition, eight contextual factors that need to be taken into account are reviewed. Three strategies are proposed to facilitate the adoption of quality assurance measures by academics functioning in challenging contexts.*

Context: national policy developments and quality assurance in higher education

South Africa has a trinary higher education system consisting of universities, technikons and vocational colleges. This trinary divide is reflected in the quality assurance arrangements of the system. For technikons, a certification system that developed into a programme accreditation system has existed since 1989 under the auspices of the statutory Certification Council for Technikon Education (SERTEC). In universities, traditional quality assurance mechanisms such as external examinations, peer review of research outputs, and departmental evaluations have been well accepted and utilised with varying measures of effectiveness for the improvement of quality. In addition, professional programmes (constituting 50–60% of all university programmes) are subject to the scrutiny of professional associations.

However, there was very little planned and systematic attention to quality assurance in universities before the establishment of the Quality Promotion Unit (QPU) in 1996. It operated until 1999 as a non-statutory, sectoral body whose approach to quality assurance was based on auditing institutional quality management systems. Its work recognised the diversity of universities and a 'fitness for purpose' approach was adopted in the belief that this would be the least threatening and most likely to lead to quality improvements. The QPU performed 10 institutional audits. Although a number of criticisms can be levelled at the way in which it performed its quality assurance functions, there is undeniable evidence that, even during the short time of its existence and with very limited resources, the QPU did play an important role in initiating a quality culture in the university sector, particularly in those institutions which had been audited.

In 1995 the *South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) Act* was promulgated, providing, *inter alia*, for a National Qualifications Framework, and Education and Training

Quality Assurance bodies (ETQAs). The Higher Education Act of 1997 established a statutory Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) which will be responsible for quality assurance and improvement in the entire higher education sector. This is a massive task in a trinary system with very dissimilar levels of and approaches to quality among institutional types, as well as between historically advantaged and disadvantaged institutions. The *Higher Education Act* requires that the HEQC will be the ETQA for higher education and negotiations are under way for the HEQC to play a coordinating role of all of the other ETQAs in higher education. At present about 40 bodies have applied for registration as ETQAs for higher education. The explosion of private higher education provision in South Africa is adding a new dimension to the quality assurance scene. It is becoming increasingly clear that the first order of business for the new HEQC will have to be regulating private providers and coordinating the various ETQAs. How it will, in addition, give effect to its threefold legislated task of institutional audits, programme accreditation and quality improvement is still unsure.

For academic staff at universities the developments, at the national level, of external quality assurance imply many new requirements to be met. That is not to say that quality is a new issue. As pointed out above, there are well-established, often semi-formal practices at the departmental or faculty level. However, outcomes are not fed back into an institutional system and, therefore, have little systemic effect on the improvement of teaching and learning. Academic staff may, in the near future, be required to develop fully fledged self-evaluation systems in their departments or faculties and to meet the requirements of institutional quality management systems in a response to external quality assurance requirements. For university staff who have not been exposed to systematic programme assessment or accreditation (apart from those required by the professional bodies), this will pose many new challenges: challenges that most staff might hesitate to face in the light of the challenging contexts in which they have to function. These new tasks will also require new skills, but the environment in which academic staff work is such that it is not clear how the new tasks on which quality assurance depends can be done, nor how the new skills will be acquired and deployed.

Contextual Factors at the University of the Orange Free State and their Implications for Quality

The University of the Orange Free State (UOFS) is one of the older South African higher education institutions. It is the flagship university in the central, agrarian part of the country, and its traditional student body has been composed mainly of White Afrikaans-speaking young people, a large proportion of whom came from the Free State farming community. In spite of its conservative reputation, the UOFS was one of the first Afrikaans universities to open its doors to Black students. In the height of the apartheid years, when segregation in higher education was still firmly entrenched, the institution admitted its first Black post-graduate students in 1977, and Black undergraduates from 1983.

With a student enrolment of just over 10,000, the UOFS is a medium-sized university in South African terms. What makes it unique is that it sees itself as a multicultural institution and has succeeded in transforming, with relatively few problems, the student body from an overwhelmingly White Afrikaans-speaking one, to almost equal numbers of White Afrikaans-speaking and Black English-speaking students. These dramatic changes happened quickly. In 1994, the year of the first democratic elections in South Africa, the UOFS had a total of 9186 students, consisting of 1362 Black (including Coloured and Asian) students (14.8%), and 7824 White students (85.2%). By 1999 the composition of the student

population had changed dramatically. Of a total of 10,373 students, 4894 (47%) were Black, Coloured and Asian, and 5479 (53%) were White. This trend is expected to continue and it is envisaged that the ratio of Black to White students will be 64:36 by the year 2001.

Changes in the ways that academic staff are conceptualising and performing their roles relate to responses of South African higher education in general, and the UOFS in particular, to societal interests and needs. Against this background it is important to take note of eight factors that have a considerable effect on the ability of academic staff to respond to the new quality agenda.

The transformation of the student body has affected academic staff in various ways. One important development was the adoption of an official institutional policy of parallel-medium instruction (Afrikaans and English) in 1996. For academic staff, this meant that their workloads increased dramatically and that they had to present the same subject content at least twice—once for the English group and once for the Afrikaans group. No additional remuneration was provided. Staff now had to conduct their lectures in English which for the large majority is a second language, used very little for professional purposes.

Staff members were also increasingly confronted with students coming from cultural, social and educational backgrounds differing substantially from their own and from that of the students with whom they had been involved in the past. Because many of the 'new' students are first-generation university students, who often come from deprived socio-economic circumstances, they find it difficult to cope with the demands of university life. Increasingly, academic staff have to play the role of counsellors, both personal and academic, and much more time is spent on student support.

Another set of role changes emanates from a marked shift from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning. The National Qualifications Framework puts considerable emphasis on skills and competencies, as well as on the assessment of discernible outcomes. This has led to the spotlight being moved away from the teacher to the learner, resulting in expectations of more active learning on the part of the students with the teacher in the role of facilitator.

The programme-based approach to higher education as advocated in the various policy documents has also led to major changes in the way that academics approach their core task of teaching. The organisation of higher education curricula into programmes of study has been established as a basic principle for the reconstruction of higher education. One of the implications of this principle is that new, flexible and appropriate programmes which cut across the traditional divide of education and training (knowledge and skills), and across the traditional academic disciplines (interdisciplinary programmes), should be planned and developed. Qualifications need to be registered on the NQF and in order to receive accreditation by SAQA and eventually earn subsidy, programmes must comply with a variety of prerequisites. Therefore, academic staff are expected to master the discourses of conceptualising, planning and implementing programmes; to oversee market analyses of the need for the programme and its financial viability; to market programmes; and to work with partners regionally, nationally or internationally.

Academics are also faced with a new set of criteria for research and research funding, which affects their conditions of work. The National Research Foundation, the main funding body for research in the natural, human and social sciences, is directing more funding to development of research and to capacity-building through research. It is envisaged that this will be affected by team research projects in which historically advantaged and disadvantaged institutions collaborate; the training of research interns from historically disadvantaged population groups and/or gender; and a preference for socially relevant research.

The notion of cooperative governance as proclaimed in the higher education policy documents has been a difficult one for academic staff to adjust to. Power-sharing with student groupings, as well as with representatives of other stakeholder groupings, is conflicting with the traditional values of academic freedom and autonomy which have been very strong, particularly in traditionally White universities such as the UOFS. Under the Nationalist government there was virtually no interference in the affairs of these universities and staff could go about their business in a context of utter self-reliance. Shifting the emphasis in the composition of governance structures from expertise to representiveness could, in the minds of many academics, compromise quality.

In addition to cooperative governance, the decentralisation of management and decision-making have in many universities (including the UOFS) led to the devolution of a variety of responsibilities to faculty or departmental level (such as finances), resulting in a heavier workload for staff at these levels. The decentralisation of decision-making through a system of portfolio committees and sub-committees has resulted in academic staff being involved to a much greater extent in policy-making and planning activities than before. All of these activities are compounding the weight and complexity of the workload of academic staff.

Two aspects of funding and finance have serious implications, particularly for medium-sized, rural universities, such as the UOFS. On the one hand, South African universities have seen a constant decline in subsidy income since 1984 when the present subsidy formula was put into place. This has resulted in the UOFS receiving about R60 million less in subsidy than it should have, whereas the latest subsidy cut means that the institution will have R5 million less for its budget for 2000. A second problem is that many students come from deprived backgrounds and are not in a position to pay their tuition fees in full. The result is an ever-growing burden of bad debt at higher education institutions, which in 1999 amounted to more than R450 million for all universities.

These are just two of the factors contributing to the severe financial difficulties in which many higher education institutions are finding themselves. A medium-sized university like the UOFS which does not have the economies of scale of larger institutions, and which is moreover situated in one of the poorer regions of South Africa, is therefore under severe financial pressure. This has led to a process of rationalisation in 1997 during which a considerable number of academic staff were 'retrenched' and three faculties were merged into one. At present the UOFS is facing another round of rationalisation, contributing to feelings of insecurity, hopelessness and negativity among staff.

On the one hand, then, a new national system for quality assurance that will make new demands on academic staff is envisaged. On the other hand, there are contingencies, such as the eight described above that constrain their working conditions so as to make it hard for them to respond constructively to this new quality agenda.

Heads of Departments' Perceptions of the Challenges at UOFS

As yet, no formal institutional quality assurance system is in place at UOFS. As a first step towards establishing one, a situation analysis was conducted to determine which quality assurance (self-evaluation) mechanisms and procedures exist in academic departments. Heads of departments were asked, by questionnaire, about the quality assurance (self-evaluation) mechanisms and procedures in their departments and to comment on quality assurance in general. Many of the issues identified in the responses refer to the working conditions of academics and relate to the following questions:

- How will a quality assurance system, if and when operationalised, impact on the working conditions of academic staff in the context of a South African university?
- Will such a system contribute to quality improvements in teaching and learning?
- Will staff be able to cope with the demands of such a system, taking into account the context in which they are operating?

One of the questionnaire items asked about 'quality gaps': places where practice needed further attention. Indicative comments were:

We have not found an acceptable way of evaluating the actual teaching process.

We don't know whether lecturers present quality teaching.

No formal student evaluation system of staff exists in the department.

More could be done to develop staff.

More attention must be given to the experience of staff.

No opportunity for capacity-building activities.

A great deal of attention must be given to perceptions of students from different cultural backgrounds to avoid misunderstanding.

Our analysis indicated that areas for attention include:

- incentives for teaching and learning;
- capacity-building activities (as part of affirmative action);
- mentoring, professional support and peer evaluation;
- external moderation and examining procedures;
- facilities, especially laboratory facilities; and
- standardisation and benchmarking with regard to similar departments at regional level.

From this investigation, certain positive and negative trends in terms of the use of quality assurance mechanisms and procedures were identified. Many of these can be related to the effects of the transformation of the student body. Respondents said that: 'big class teaching is problematic'; 'the teaching of disadvantaged students puts some pressure on standards'; and 'cultural differences are difficult to manage'.

The programme-based approach in higher education is also a cause for concern among academic staff. One head of department remarked that:

... the planning process (in this department) was hampered the past two years due to uncertainties with regard to the survival of this department and the form in which this subject will survive in future.

Academics have, first and foremost, an allegiance to their disciplines, but disciplinary boundaries and departmental divisions are being eroded by the increasingly interdisciplinary approach adopted in programme planning and development. Many academics notice that this makes fresh demands upon them, and are unsure and wary of the effect that interdisciplinary schemes and programme-wide planning will have on the quality of teaching and learning.

Research, as the production of new knowledge, was also seen to be under threat. One head of department said:

A supportive environment is vital for good research, but it is almost impossible

to maintain in a department heavily committed in terms of bridging and service courses.

A similar story can be told about the increasing burden that academics have to bear with regard to management and administrative responsibilities, resulting from new structures and processes of governance and management. One remark illustrating this is: 'a lack of time and administrative tasks are precluding the actualisation of some of our targets'.

All of this should be understood against a background of funding and finance problems that are manifested in staff rationalisation, lack of staff development, and difficulties in attracting and retaining well-qualified, quality staff. Respondents saw them as the factors most prohibitive of the enhancement of the quality of teaching and learning. The following comments illustrate this point:

The department is rationalised to one permanent member, which means that the first priority is survival.

Progress to pursue the necessary aims is handicapped by a shortage of resources and funding.

The planning process is time-consuming and staff are not always motivated to take part in it.

It would have been good if staff were better trained for their profession.

Continuous financial pressure on the department and demands with regard to the development of the community are becoming problematic.

The working loads are unbearable because of scaled down posts.

Quality assurance may become problematic with a staff shortage and staff members who are not really efficient and effective.

There is no time for capacity-building activities.

These are emergent issues from 'front line academics' that will have a definite effect on the intended or designed features of a quality assurance system, as Newton argues (1999, 2000). He also claims that the most basic anxiety among academics is that internal and external quality systems and quality monitoring are managerialist tools that threaten academic or professional autonomy. Yet, at UOFS, there appeared to be an acceptance that a quality assurance system needs to be developed. For example:

Many quality assurance (self-evaluation) mechanisms and procedures are informal—there is a need for a more structured approach.

Continuous evaluation is of extreme importance.

We have not found an acceptable way of evaluating the actual teaching process.

More could be done to develop staff.

Some departments and academics were positive about their informal quality assurance systems. 'Departmental self-evaluation', said one respondent, 'is operating in the light of the departmental goals and vision, and the system seems to work well in some departments and fail in other departments'.

This remark indicates that there are situational constraints that will modify the process of quality assurance implementation and that account should be taken of them. As the

earlier comments indicated, time constraints and the reality of financial stringency will be some of the most influential factors in the implementation of a quality assurance system. Since academics will be expected to adapt to these realities it implies that they will be required to be more efficient and to adopt more effective ways of delivery. As a result, quality-related activities could be perceived as eroding the valuable time available for what academics regard as their core activities. In the reigning circumstances, the introduction of new approaches to quality may even be associated with declining quality as faculty try to cope with new demands while having insufficient resources, expertise and time to sustain what they do and respond to the new quality agenda. So, will quality become a 'bolt-on extra' instead of the foundation on which other activities are built? Will it be seen as increasing the workloads and administrative burdens of staff?

This might be the case, but staff need to realise that a shift in emphasis from a resource-led culture to a problem-solving, improvement-led culture is inevitable and that it will make considerable demands on them (Newton, 1999, p. 36). This problem-solving, improvement-led culture also demonstrates the importance of action research, because it requires a move away from the old model of hierarchical, bureaucratic organisation to the new model of a problem-orientated, task-driven action learning organisation (Zuber-Skerritt, 1993).

Sustaining and Enhancing Quality of Teaching and Learning at UOFS

At the University of the Orange Free State a policy decision was taken that the teaching and learning function is to be the first priority in the implementation of a quality assurance system. Heads of departments identified the following mechanisms and procedures as the most important ones requiring attention in this regard:

- departmental self-evaluation;
- student admission procedures;
- support services;
- examinations;
- programme planning; and
- staff development.

The emphasis on staff and student development was also reflected in remarks such as:

Attention must first of all be given to the development of staff that will empower them to develop students.

Internal examination and moderation and departmental self-evaluation enable the department to maintain the standards it sets for itself.

Student evaluation of teaching provides a check that we are providing what the students require.

With these gaps and priorities in mind it is now appropriate to ask, 'How do we change the very culture of the academy; that is, change the place of teaching in higher education?' (Smith, 1995, p. 19). The bottom line seems to be learning. There is a sense that individual teachers should become classroom researchers who come together to assess the impact of their practices on their own students. By doing this, the opportunity will be provided to learn more about their own teaching effectiveness. However, that requires not just more work, but it also demands new ways of working, greater flexibility, creativity and commitment. Quite simply, the incentives and rewards for doing so have to be there, as the

American Association for Higher Education, for one, has long recognised in the work on *The New American Scholar* being led by Eugene Rice (1996).

In addition to this basic quality-related need, it is important to create opportunities for staff to learn by talking about teaching. Improving teaching through conversation and community means that teachers have to break out of the teaching isolation and advance beyond reflective practice to the exploitation of the dialogue technique (Qualters, 1995, pp. 47, 54). Teachers, therefore, have to develop a mutual trust and respect that will allow them to discuss issues in greater detail than they might through casual conversations. This follows the principle that:

... we need to bring our mental models to the surface, to hold them up for rigorous scrutiny in conversations which balance advocating our position with invitations to inquiry, where we can reveal how we are thinking, and where we can make our own thinking open to the influence of others (Smith, 1995, p. 9).

It is also necessary to see beyond the need for technical learning of information and adaptive learning, each of which is important, and to seek for that learning which enhances our capacity to create. This could also be referred to as 'double-loop learning' which occurs when error is detected and corrected in ways involving the modification of an organisation's underlying norms, policies and objectives. This modification or change can be achieved through action research.

Finally, it is important to move beyond our 'pedagogical solitude' toward treating teaching as community property. This requires artefacts that can capture the complexity of teaching, and peers who are willing and able to review these materials.

As an example of the latter, a proposal for quality assurance of UOFS staff and staff development with self-evaluation as the basis has been put forward. An important part of the appraisal process is the teaching portfolio which is a comprehensive documentary record of a teacher's activities and accomplishments (Kulski, 1996). The portfolio is an instrument that grows out of substantial reflection and analysis tied to hard evidential materials or 'artefacts' of teaching, and it offers teachers a revealing and credible system for valid assessment of performance (Zubizaretta, 1995).

As a staff development activity, portfolio programmes can provide a non-threatening environment for academic staff to discuss and resolve concerns related to their teaching and create a 'dialogue' on teaching. By working collaboratively in compiling their portfolios, academic staff are afforded ownership of the process, and are thus perhaps more likely to become involved. Portfolio programmes also show promise with respect to providing staff with an opportunity to share their expertise and accomplishments, thus providing recognition for achievements in their teaching which are otherwise disregarded (Kulski, 1996).

Action research provides another useful theoretical framework for new and creative ways of working. For example, Zuber-Skerrit (1993) demonstrates that action research projects can be designed to improve the quality of learning and teaching and promote cultures of self-evaluation in teaching and learning. Action research is a way of thinking and an approach to enquiry that yields information, as does traditional experimental research, and supports action and practical improvement. It involves gathering information through a wide range of methods, such as the nominal group and repertory grid techniques; using tools such as diaries, log books and journals to sustain reflection and develop understanding; and getting people to commit to improving their practices with the advice of their colleagues and students. This is where faculty group-support programmes, long-term mentors, or ongoing peer consultations can be especially valuable as means to

quality improvement (Qualters, 1995). These techniques have one thing in common: they all encourage teachers to think about their teaching experiences and the effects that their teaching is having on students.

Although it is important to provide fresh opportunities for learning, it is also important to recognise how much is learned, not least about quality, in the normal sites of daily work. For that reason, it is also important to direct a quality gaze upon things such as:

- assessing, examining and new forms of evaluating students' learning;
- individualised work with students, including tutoring;
- links between teaching and research and how they support each other;
- student feedback systems and other feedback systems;
- utilising and developing teaching technology;
- student progression, employability and labour markets;
- cooperative and collegial working; and
- curriculum design and programme planning and development.

In the latter regard, the Quality Assurance Committee of the UOFS has developed a set of criteria for the evaluation of learning programmes, during the phases of programme planning, programme implementation and programme output. These criteria include programme relevance and coherence, applicability of teaching and learning methods, appropriateness of resources, effectiveness of the programme, quality of programme management, development of generic skills and competencies, provision for effective partnerships, international recognition, contribution to the employability of learners, benefits for society, value added to learners and promotion of lifelong learning. We believe that evaluating all existing and proposed new programmes against this set of indicators will make an important contribution towards enhancing the quality of teaching and learning in the institution.

Conclusion

It has been argued that the best option for staff who find themselves in constraining conditions is to make a shift in emphasis from a resource-led culture to a problem-solving, improvement-led culture. In this regard, action research provides a theoretical framework for real improvement in teaching and could be seen as a good starting point to promote a culture of learning in the teaching and learning function of the university. However, it is a substantial task to move from informal and uneven departmental self-evaluation processes to institution-wide quality assurance systems. Furthermore, there are at least eight factors at work that interfere with academic staff's willingness and ability to respond to this quality agenda. However, the analysis has identified ways of advancing this quality agenda, but these come at a cost. More serious is the suggestion that if academic staff become occupied by building and conforming to formal quality assurance procedures, their attention may be diverted from teaching and research. In that sense, quality assurance that is not integrated into the core activities of academic staff, such as programme planning and development and professional growth and development, may harm quality.

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