Quality teaching and learning in South African universities: Policies and practices

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Introduction

Although quality assurance and control in the global higher education scene is not a new of the factors which gave rise

to a quality culture in higher education internationally are also common to South African higher education, such as a general public concern with the increase of expenditure on higher education, the massification of higher education, the demand for increased accountability from government and the public, growing student and staff mobility, and rapid technological growth and development. However, conspicuous in the quality movement in South African higher education is the fact that it is being substantially shaped by the legislative and policy direction of the new democratic government. This framework within which a national quality assurance system is evolving, is addressed later in this paper.

No national quality assurance system has existed in South African higher education in the past. Mechanisms and procedures for self-evaluation and quality assurance and improvement have, however, for many years been part and parcel of institutional policies and practices. Such mechanisms include, for example, accreditation by professional bodies, departmental self-evaluation, the system of external examining, external consultation and involvement in the appointment of academic staff, peer review of research outputs, etc. In addition, institutional autonomy has traditionally played an extremely important role in South African (particularly historically advantaged) universities. The self-regulation powers of universities granted by government implied that universities are legally recognized as independent certification bodies.

Major changes are now taking place in South African higher education, amongst others in terms of quality assurance and control. This is a long and difficult road fraught with many hazards. South African higher education should take note of the road maps provided by other countries that have made more progress in

societies, higher education is under strong pressure to expand and differentiate. Higher education is thus becoming more complex, and it is becoming more difficult centrally to plan and govern programmes and institutions. The expansion of knowledge and the explosion of students in higher education, in conjunction with a decline in public expenditure, have led to greater public scrutiny of the quality of services and outcomes provided by the higher education sector (Ratcliff, 1997, p. 28).

Within this context, defining the quality of higher education becomes difficult. Two different philosophical perspectives on quality exist: the essentialist point of view and the nominalist point of view. The first approach is seeking the essence of quality, whereas the second approach implies a more instrumentalist interpretation, leaving aside the disturbing question of what quality really is. In the latter sense quality could be regarded as 'fitness for purpose' which implies that there are as many definitions of quality in higher education as there are stakeholders (such as students, teaching staff, scientific communities, government and employers), multiplied by the number of purposes for higher education these stakeholders distinguish (Commission of European Communities, 1993, pp. 7-8).

It becomes clear that quality is a flexible term that can be defined from various perspectives (Van Vught & Westerheijden, 1995, pp. 99-101). Quality does not lend itself to straightforward interpretation. It is a contested concept with many conceptualizations, each of which has implications for quality assurance (Strydom, 1995, p. 18). Quality could also be understood as a multi-dimensional concept that is dynamic and expresses itself in continuous innovation (Van Bruggen, Scheele & Westerheijden, 1998, p. 88).

In defining quality for South African universities the following must be considered. Taking into account that there are different meanings or notions of quality, it seems that a rigid definition of quality in universities will not prevail, although a broad framework needs to be available within which the nature of academic quality can be identified. A relativistic approach to quality that ignores the contexts of university quality could end up in presenting anything as quality in universities. A more acceptable approach is to have an umbrella definition in which different concepts of quality.

a broader scope of quality assurance in higher education. This refers *inter alia*, to a need for the acceleration of innovation in content, in teaching processes, and for a better interface with industry and society which must, in turn, lead to systems of quality assurance that focus on the innovation capacity and on actual, continuous innovations at all levels of the institution. The institution's capacity for proactive behaviour and continuous innovation should be assessed regularly in quality assurance systems. This broader scope of quality assurance leads to three consequences. First, quality assurance is a continuous process with longer (strategic plans) and shorter (specific measures, adaptations) cycles. A second important consequence is that society — represented by the government — has to have the guarantee that the traditional parameters of quality *and* measures of pro-active behaviour are developed and assessed at all levels of the institution. A third consequence is that quality assurance systems should not consist of programme assessment only, but ought to include institutional assessment as well (Van Bruggen, Scheele & Westerheijden, 1998, p. 89).

In most higher education systems, quality assurance starts with self-assessment. Self-assessment reports are the basis of evaluation by external committees, mostly consisting of peers. These external committees reflect on the self-assessment done by the institution/programme, and investigate the situation though site visits. They then write public reports that include recommendations for improvement (Van Bruggen, Scheele & Westerheijden, 1998, p. 92). The importance and benefit of quality assurance which starts with self-assessment is emphasized by Kells.

The self-regulated university, while certainly experiencing periodic difficulties responding to the demands of its publics and to external conditions and challenges, is in a different situation. Its levels of self-knowledge, gained increasingly in cycles of study, and the strength it accumulates through internal control, regulation and change and through the validation and assistance of peer professionals and institutions, enables it to keep control of its destiny, to build further strength and to respond to the challenges it faces (Kells, 1992, p. 39).

Global models of quality in universities (self-evaluation)

Recent international studies refer to a wide range of purposes for quality assurance in higher education. These include to:

- ensure accountability for the use of public funds;
- improve the quality of higher education provision;
- inform funding decisions;
- inform students and employers;
- stimulate competitiveness within and between institutions;
- undertake a quality check on new (sometimes private) institutions;
- assign institutional status;
- support the transfer of authority between the state and institutions;
- assist mobility of students; and
- make international comparisons (European Training Foundation, 1998, p. 26).

Quality assurance in higher education refers to the two key purposes of accountability and improvement. Attempts to achieve these purposes differ from country to country. Ratcliff, (1997, p. 29) provides the following examples.

The French model of external reviewers serves as an archetype for quality assurance directed at answering accountability questions; the external reviewers validate the quality of the educational programme or institution through implicit or explicit comparisons. The English

model of quality assurance through peer review serves the aim of enhancing programme effectiveness and improving teaching and learning. The American model of voluntary accreditation, drawing on both traditions, ensures that the quality review process is conducted outside the context of government funding and control. Self-study criteria and peers conducting reviews are promulgated across state boundaries insuring that one system is examined within the context and experience of others but with the primary aim of programme enhancement and improvement of student learning. Another distinctive feature of the American model is its increasing reliance on assessment of student learning outcomes as an integral part of the quality review process.

Lewis Elton (1992, p. 3) contrasts quality assurance or control and quality enhancement measures. He groups the "quality A's" — quality assurance, accountability, audit and assessment — and sees them as concerned with control of both quality and the people who are responsible for quality. Quality enhancement is seen as related to the "E's" — empowerment, enthusiasm, expertise and excellence.

Internationally it has become more common to appraise teaching directly. The most widely used mechanism has been the student feedback questionnaire, though some institutions are seeking more diverse forms of feedback through teaching profiles or portfolios. In this regard certain institutions are also reflecting on the scope and focus of their academic audits. The question has been asked whether there should not be a greater focus on teaching and learning. It relates to the whole idea of the teaching practitioner or the reflective practitioner. It also relates to the transformative purpose of higher education that reinforces the preferred focus of quality monitoring as argued by Harvey and Green (1993), namely, "quality as transformation".

The quality *enhancement* of teaching tends to be both more diverse and less clearly defined than quality *assurance*. Examples of mechanisms for the enhancement of teaching quality are workshops, short courses, projects, grants for teaching initiatives, awards to outstanding teachers, mentoring systems for new staff, voluntary teaching and course evaluation mechanisms, etc. Given the variety of types of schemes and the wide diversity in which they operate, Kember proposes some categorization scheme. This two-category scheme refers to the ongoing project-type initiatives and workshop-type activities. (Kember, 1997, p. 76).

Although a wide variety of functions of quality assurance are mentioned, improvement and accountability remain the dominating functions.

The elements that support improvement are:

- stress on self-assessment;
- peer-evaluation;
- operational recommendations; and
- no direct link of financial consequences to evaluation result.

The elements that support accountability are:

- public reports;
- independent experts; and
- meta-evaluation and a follow up by the government or a governmental agency (Van Bruggen, Scheele & Westerheijden, 1998, p. 87).

A study prepared for the Commission of the European Communities (1993), reveals that new procedures and mechanisms for quality management are being developed in many West European countries. Common elements of this 'new quality management' can be identified. The first element relates to the managing agent (or agents) of the

quality assurance management system. Such an agent should be independent and have the responsibility of managing the system at a meta-level. The meta-level agent should be the coordinator of the system, acting independently from government politics and policies and not having to impose upon the institutions an approach that is prescribed by the government. The second common element in the 'new' quality management system is the mechanism of self-evaluation. Only if academics accept quality management as their own activity, will the system be successful. Selfevaluation is therefore a crucial mechanism to promote the acceptance of a quality management system by academics. A third common element appears to be the mechanism of peer review, especially one or more site visits by external experts. A fourth element in the "new method" of quality management is the reporting of the results of and experience with these methods. In this regard some form of reporting of the conclusions of the peer review team is very useful. The final common element in the 'new' approach to quality management concerns the possible relationship between the outcomes of a quality review system and (governmental) decisions about the funding of higher education activities. A rigid, linear relationship between quality review reports and funding decisions is not desirable (Commission of the European Communities, 1993, pp. 20-24).

The importance of context

Local context will always have a major influence on both the problems and the possible solutions in the implementation of a quality assurance system. Central concepts in this regard are differentiation and diversity. Mass higher education necessarily leads to differentiation of the interests, abilities and prior learning of higher education's clientele, particularly students. This in turn leads to differential quality in education programmes and institutions (Ratcliff, 1997, p. 22). The differentiation of the knowledge base, the growing complexity of post-modern technological society, and the diversification of student interests, abilities and backgrounds are precipitating the process of institutional differentiation. Such a differentiation leads to a decentralized system of quality assurance relying on self-study and peer review as primary mechanisms in the process (Ratcliff, 1997, p. 23).

Institutional differentiation is manifested in a variety of ways. Birnbaum (1983) distinguishes several different types of differentiation.

- Systematic differentiation refers to the different types of institutions to be found within a higher education system.
- Structural differentiation refers to institutional differences that exist due to either historical and legal foundations of institutions, or the differences in the division of authority within institutions.
- Programmatic differentiation relates to differences in programmes and services provided by different institutions within a system.
- Process differentiation describes differences in the way that teaching, research and/or service is provided by institutions.
- Reputational differentiation communicates the perceived differences in institutions based on status.
- Constituent differentiation alludes to differences in students, communities, and clients served.
- Value and climatic differentiation is associated with differences in environment and sub-cultures that may occur within or between institutions.

In the South African higher education system all of the above types of institutional differentiation are evident. This factor, together with others related to contested and

contesting notions of quality, tremendously complicates the establishment and implementation of a national quality assurance for South African higher education.

Quality in South African higher education in the 1990s

Over the past ten years much has been done to establish a workable quality assurance system for South African higher education. The cornerstone of this system is the massive developmental research of the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) which led to the acceptance of a number of related Acts to establish a political forum for a quality assurance system on the macro-level. This led, on the meso-level, to the creation of different governing bodies responsible for the execution of the terms of the Acts. The last stage in the development of a quality assurance system, namely on the micro-level, is now in progress. Both the institutional audit and the programme accreditation dimensions of quality assurance pertain to the micro-level.

The broad framework for quality assurance, programme assessment and accreditation was specified by the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) in its final report, published in August 1995 and titled *A framework for transformation*. The NCHE saw quality and the assurance of quality as not only an internal institutional matter, but also an essential ingredient of an emerging new relationship between the government and the higher education sector. The former is responsible for stej0Tc(e) Tj Tw0.118

A second major development was the development of a new higher education policy and promulgation of a new Higher Education Act. This was done through a process of consultation of the concerned parties. The Green Paper on Higher Education, which has circulated in higher education circles since December 1996, endorses the NCHE proposal that a quality assurance system for higher education has to be coordinated by the HEQC. The functions of the HEQC in connection with programme accreditation and institutional auditing are formulated in more detail by the Green Paper than by the NCHE. The Green Paper, however, makes a distinction between the functions of programme accreditation and institutional auditing on the one hand, and quality promotion on the other. It recommends that quality promotion is to be undertaken by the Quality Promotion Unit (QPU) of the Committee of University Principals under the aegis of the Council for Higher Education (CHE) (RSA, 1996, p. 32).

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departments in which teaching and research quality is assessed. In universities where this practice has been introduced quality levels have been enhanced considerably already.

The Quality Promotion Unit (QPU) of the South African Vice Chancellors; Association (SAUVCA) which was established four years ago chose as its first step to embark on a schedule of auditing the mechanisms for quality assurance in universities. A number of universities were subjected to this first phase of quality promotion. The next phase was intended to consist of the evaluation of programmes in universities with a view to some form of quality assessment. This two-stage approach to quality assurance in higher education is not peculiar to South Africa, but has also been adopted in some countries in Europe. Participation in the evaluations of the QPU is voluntary and SAUVCA does not have any power to enforce compliance with the recommendations arising from the QPU evaluations or audits. The focus of the QPU, being a sector body established by higher education institutions themselves, has all along been on quality improvement. However, with the establishment of the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) as a statutory body for the quality promotion and assurance of the entire higher education band, the expectation is that the focus will shift to accountability, amongst other reasons to provide the government with some foundation on which to base subsidy decisions in a difficult period of financial stringency.

For technikons the quality assurance process has developed very differently. For the past fourteen years technikons have been subjected to the policies and practices concerning quality laid down by the Certification Council for Technikon Education (SERTEC) which functions as a statutory accreditation body. SERTEC performs its functions against the background of a far greater degree of curricular standardization for technikons than is the case with universities. In addition, these programme accreditation functions are performed in conjunction with a wide number of programme stakeholders, namely the various professional boards.

In order to attain the ideal of moving to a unitary higher education system and bridge the divide between the quality assurance systems of universities and technikons respectively, the Higher Education Act proposed the establishment of the HEQC as a single quality assurance agency for South African higher education. For this purpose the CHE established a task team to advise it on the most appropriate way to fulfil its quality assurance responsibilities. The task team has had some consultations with SAUVCA (on the QPU) and with SERTEC. Documentation on quality assurance in higher education in South Africa and in the UK, the Netherlands, France, Belgium, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Australia and New Zealand has been analyzed and summarized. The results of this study led to a recommendation of the task team that SERTEC and the OPU should be absorbed into the new HEOC. A similar process has been followed in some other countries where a central and integrated quality assurance structure on the operational level which was somewhat removed from the control of the institutions themselves, was created. The recommendations of the task team were that the HEQC would perform all the necessary quality assurance functions on the systemic level and levy fees for these services in terms of the Higher Education Act. This implies that the current national quality assurance responsibilities of the QPU and SERTEC will be taken over by the HEQC once it becomes operational. At present these developments are still in progress and have not been finalized.

These developments will most certainly have an influence on the present quality assurance situation in both the university and the technikon sectors. Universities will have to prepare themselves for rigorous programme evaluation involving external

evaluators. Technikons, on the other hand, will have to prepare themselves for intensive audits of their institutional quality assurance mechanisms. Since self-evaluation forms an indispensable part of both of these forms of evaluation, quality promotion officers will have to start preparing their institutions for comprehensive self-evaluation exercises. Many higher education institutions have as yet not made sufficient progress in introducing regular cycles of evaluation of academic departments nor in developing institutional systems for quality assurance. It is foreseen, therefore, that the demands made on higher education institutions in terms of quality assurance by both the ETQAs and the HEQC will be considerable.

Institutional responses of South African universities

For the purpose of investigating institutional responses of South African universities to quality assurance demands, an analysis was made of documentation deriving from six institutional audits performed by the Quality Promotion Unit. This documentation includes six self-evaluation portfolios compiled by the institutions themselves, four audit reports compiled by the audit team and four case studies written by the quality officers of the institutions concerned. The institutions represent two types of universities (i.e. historically disadvantaged and historically advantaged universities). However, the sample was too small to make any valid comparisons or conclusions on differences between the two categories. Despite context specific variations between the universities, some general patterns were evident in their responses to quality demands. Across the six universities that had been audited, the following general trends could be observed.

There is an absence of a shared notion of quality. According to the SAUVCA Quality Audit Manual (QPU, 1997), the South African higher education system demonstrates diversity, with special reference to the extent to which a culture of quality for teaching and learning exists in the various institutions. This is confirmed by the above-mentioned resources. Most of the institutions concerned had not developed a clearly defined and shared notion of quality at all levels. Different faculties would focus on different mechanisms, for example, elements of discipline, international recognition of qualifications, usefulness in the community, and quality students who would find outside employment. Also, various notions and interpretations of quality exist such as:

- fitness of purpose;
- quest for zero defect (product quality, service quality, quality assurance); and
- value for money.

Therefore, it appears as if quality means different things to different universities and that individual staff members are emphasizing different mechanisms and procedures to attain quality. These differences could be due to the diversity in the higher education system as well as to the fact that South African institutions are still in the process of becoming acquainted with the notion of quality.

External quality reviews worldwide have a dual purpose, namely reviews for accountability and improvement (QPU, 1997). The emphasis on either of these varies depending on the degree of accountability required by the authorities concerned. The fact that quality assurance in South Africa is in its beginning phase and that the QPU focused on improvement during the first round of audits, explains why the purpose of quality mechanisms and procedures in the majority of universities is mainly directed at continuous commitment to improvement and not accountability.

The QPU aimed at improvement through institutional self-evaluation and, where appropriate, the sharing of good practice among institutions. Examples of good

practice identified in the audited universities range from student evaluation/participation/representation systems, staff development/orientation programmes/workshops, innovative approaches to academic functioning, a staff appraisal system that recognizes community work, a performance development system, to collaboration between institutions.

The awareness and presence of the notion of self-evaluation, which is a necessary requirement to formulate and design a strategic plan, differ among higher education institutions. The majority of the institutions investigated seem to understand the value and importance of self-evaluation, but experienced problems with the establishment and implementation of such a system.

The functions, areas and issues that impact on quality, differ among higher education institutions. Examples of issues include:

- accommodating disadvantaged students;
- the employability of graduates in the humanities;
- uniqueness of academic departments;
- policies on accountability and system improvement;
- improving the quality of life of students taking into account the number of programmes; and
- multiple entry and exit points by means of which students can interrupt their studies.

It appears that the morale at South African universities is generally low (e.g. feelings of insecurity due to the possibilities of downsizing and rationalization). While the staff and students of some universities have positive feelings towards their own institutions, others demonstrate strong feelings of independence and uniqueness as well as loyalty.

It seems that with regard to vertical and horizontal communication within institutions there are differences (e.g. some institutions demonstrate effective communication between the different levels, while others have problems with vertical communication where management decisions do not percolate to all relevant levels). The problems with communication may be due to the fact that quality is a new and complex concept to implement. Problems with implementation are also evident where it appears from the documentation that in general the translation of institutional plans into actions is incomplete, because the main focus is on the process and not on how to gauge outcomes.

The impact of quality policies on university teaching and learning in South Africa

Higher education in South Africa is characterized by massification, globalization, the access of non-traditional students, striving towards quality and cost-effective educational programmes, as well as a paradigm shift from lecture-based to resource-based learning. Some universities in South Africa have started to move towards new teaching/learning methods in order to meet these demands. There are also several other factors to consider.

External factors have specific implications for the quality movement in South Africa. Not all higher education institutions, for example, are prepared for massification. Their infrastructure did not keep pace with the growth in student numbers, therefore

these institutions would need more resources and, because of an increasing number of non-traditional students, have to provide more academic support. This could have quality implications. It is evident that quality has to be included in the strategic planning of institutions. Some universities have Academic Development Centres, which are playing a central role in the university's approach to quality in teaching and learning. The efficiency of these centres is uneven.

Diversity exists among higher education institutions with regard to the use of the external examiner system. In some cases entire faculties use the system, in others it is used only by individual departments within faculties. Across institutions there is also evidence of disagreement among staff and students with regard to the effectiveness of the external examiner system in maintaining standards, (e.g. due to a lack of time at the end of the year, a lack of resources and of experienced examiners). It also appears that the external examiner system in some universities has not developed sufficiently to ensure good quality academic programmes.

It seems that there exist differences with regard to student-evaluation within and among universities. Student evaluation of teaching staff is described as uncoordinated, unregulated, not scientifically designed with no report back system. Student evaluation of post-graduate supervisors appears to be patchy and inconsistent; furthermore, no structured training exists for research supervisors — this seems a general problem in most of the universities. The major problem in assessing teaching excellence seems to be an absence of clear criteria. Although in some universities Excellence of Teaching Awards are in existence, there is still no evidence that this creates general improvement in teaching.

Quality in curriculum development is hampered by the fact that in some universities there are not enough incentives in place for curriculum development and students do not have any input in curriculum development. Some universities demonstrate curriculum changes to adapt to (mainly external) demands (e.g. the labor market). These changes include the restructuring of programmes to become more vocationally orientated, implementing multiple entry and exit points, forming programme clusters, internal restructuring of faculties to be more flexible and effective, developing a generic first year, including prior learning in admission requirements.

Student academic development is a vital factor in most South African universities due to the fact that they have to cope with a considerable number of students who are ill-prepared for higher education studies. Some institutions try to solve these problems via bridging programmes. With regard to student intake there are a number of factors that reflect negatively on quality such as students' financial problems, and poor school leaving results.

Language issues such as moving from dual-medium or Afrikaans medium instruction to English as medium of instruction have major implications for quality at some universities. Additional complicating factors include the fact that English is not the mother tongue of many students, and a high student: staff ratio which necessitates the increasing use of materials to supplement the lack of individual teaching attention. The use of study materials requires a high level of English literacy that is not prevalent among the majority of students.

Issues emerging at all levels of the quality policy process

widely divergent notions of quality between stakeholders and role-players, all contribute to tensions at macro, meso and micro levels. These tensions are explored in some of the following issues.

Internal versus external stakeholders

Historically, internal stakeholders such as academic peers and students have played the major role in quality assurance processes. The role of business and industry as external stakeholders has been limited to the assessment and accreditation of those university programmes for which professional boards exist. Government has played a very small role in university quality assurance; however, this will change dramatically with the implementation of the new policies referred to earlier.

As far as the composition of the Audit Panel by the QPU is concerned, the majority of members consisted of academic peers (three members with university experience), and at least one member with private sector, public sector or statutory board experience. If at all possible, the audit panel should also include a higher educationist from a foreign country. Once universities are engaged in programme assessment on a wider scale, the inclusion of experts in the field of the employment area and/or from professional associations will become important. It seems as if the development of the quality assurance process goes hand in hand with increased participation by external stakeholders.

Processes versus outcomes

The focus of the audits of the Quality Promotion Unit was on strategic quality management, and it is stated clearly in the Audit Manual that these audits were concerned with the processes of quality assurance, not with quality assurance *per se* (QPU, 1997). The audits were aimed at evaluating the mechanisms and procedures to ensure quality at an institution (i.e. processes), and not at evaluating final outcomes of the programmes of universities.

In the new dispensation, it is still unsure where the emphasis will be — on inputs, processes or outcomes. It is clear, however, that the new quality assurance agency will assume full policy development and operational responsibilities for quality assurance across the entire higher education sector. In a higher education system as diverse as the South African one, it could be expected that, initially at least, the main focus will remain one on processes, instead of outcomes. The notion of quality as value-addedness should remain an important one in the South African higher education system which needs to cater for large numbers of students from disadvantaged economic, social and educational backgrounds.

Qualitative versus quantitative assessments

Qualitative assessment is associated with subjective judgements and quantitative assessment with objective quantitative performance indicators. The QPU of SAUVCA identified primary and secondary performance indicators that are valuable assessment tools to measure performance indicators in line with and in relation to the goal of the optimum result (QPU, 1997, p. 35). According to the Audit Manual the selection of performance indicators should arise naturally out of the institution's operations. The indicators secondar

Manual (1997, 10) states that it would be wrong for an institution to concentrate on quantitative performance indicators to the detriment of the qualitative performance indicators. However, qualitative performance indicators are much more difficult to define and to evaluate than the hard figures that comprise the quantitative performance indicators, and will probably for some time to come still play a major role in quality assessment.

Autonomy versus control

Political domination and the overemphasis of autonomy largely influenced higher education regulation in this country. The establishment and governance of higher education institutions were influenced by apartheid. This actually caused an ironical situation, in which historically white universities gained boundless institutional autonomy (apart from student admissions that were restricted according to racial groups). They could do whatever they wanted, with irregular state interference (Fourie, 1998, p. 4). For the historically black institutions, governance took the form of a purely state-directed system. Through legislation, the government acquired *de facto* control over academic and administrative appointments, the range and levels of programmes offered, and restriction of the political activities of students and staff.

In the new dispensation a paradigm shift occurred from the state-directed system to the state-supervised system. The current South African higher education system can be broadly located in the state-supervised model, which implies that most of the decision-making is decentralized to the institutions themselves with the central authority focusing on a few variables only. The government will change the 'rules of the game' if there are no satisfactory results from the relatively autonomous players. Clearly, this state supervisory model increases institutional autonomy, but implies the necessity of a system of quality control and the evaluation of performance. In this sense, institutional autonomy is balanced by accountability. These tensions will also be a reality in the future process of evaluation in South Africa. Remote steering, self-regulation and *a posteriori* control need to coexist as functions located at different operating levels from government to institution. The message is clear: if there is no coexistence, relations of domination will prevail.

In the South African higher education context, it is necessary to think about the reasons for or purposes of the establishment of a national higher education quality assurance system. The differences in the approaches to quality assurance among the QPU, SERTEC, CHE/HEQC and SAQA/ETQAs, professional boards and other stakeholders will have far-reaching implications for the establishment of a single quality assurance system for higher education. With the incorporation of the QPU and SERTEC (both sectoral bodies) into the HEQC (a statutory government agency) the indications are that there is a movement towards increased state control, at least in the area of quality assurance.

Diversity versus uniformity

This issue involves the following question: can a unified system of external evaluation be applied in countries that have institutions with different degrees of autonomy, different histories, missions and aims? (Frazer, 1997, p. 350). This is probably one of the crucial issues that the new HEQC will have to deal with.

The QPU approached institutional audits from the following points of departure: that the quality assurance process must take cognisance of the local, regional and national context in which an institution functions, and that the notion of quality used in audits should be conceptualized in a broad and flexible way in such a manner that it suits the particular circumstances of each institution (QPU, 1997, p. 7). Clearly this approach

made provision for diversity in the system, and for this reason too, self-evaluation was seen as the cornerstone of the quality assurance system.

The latest policy developments could point towards an increased emphasis on accountability which could lead towards a greater measure of uniformity in the system. The new national quality assurance agency will have to deal with the dilemma of promoting diversity, while at the same time providing evidence of accountability to stakeholders. The latter unfortunately tends to produce conformity.

Competition versus cooperation

The focus on institutional self-evaluation adopted by the QPU has not given rise to intense competitions between institutions, even though the sharing of good practice is aimed at, and audit reports are public documents. The Audit Manual states clearly that "any attempts to compile ranking tables according to some sets of generic criteria is contrary to the principle of institutional improvement, and will be detrimental to the whole quality assurance system" (QPU, 1997, p. 2). Inter-institutional co-operation and collaboration, particularly in a regional context, is an important policy principle of the present government. Several regional consortia exist with a variety of functions and activities. It is conceivable that quality assurance could in future become one of the endeavours of such consortia, particularly with a view to capacity building of institutions with little experience and expertise in this regard.

The issues addressed above are not only pertinent for quality policy and practice at the national level, but also at the institutional and departmental level. Careful consideration needs to be given to questions such as:

- who are the internal and external stakeholders and role-players who should be involved in our quality assurance?
- will our assessment focus on processes or outcomes or both?
- will we be making use of quantitative or qualitative information or both? and
- how far can quality policies and practices be the same amongst departments, and institutions?

Quality: 'Steering at a distance'

Similar to the Australian experience, but probably for other reasons, the quality policy and practice for South African universities has also been one tfg tt,

Concluding reflections

The quality movement and quality assurance in South African higher education is now, with the establishment of the Higher Education Quality Committee of the Council for Higher Education, entering a new era. In general, a permeating quality culture is still sadly lacking in South African universities. However, institutions can no longer afford to sit back and wait for policy directives in this regard. Universities will have to be pro-active in establishing self-evaluation (quality assurance) systems at institutional and programme level.

The biggest challenge for South African universities is to establish a quality culture and quality assurance systems in such a way so as to promote a sense of ownership among all stakeholders in the institution — academic, administrative and professional staff, students, and funders. A second major challenge is the prioritization of quality measures and linking them closely with the strategic planning of the institution. In order to meet these two challenges a combination of top-down and bottom-up processes is required.

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