JACOB SELESHO,

Head: Post Graduate Studies in Education

School of Teacher Education, *Central University of Technology, Free State*

South Africa

THE IMPACT OF PROGRAMME ACCREDITATION IN A TRANSFORMED HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION: CHALLENGES AND SUCCESS

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Abstract

The perception held by academic staff of programme re-accreditation has been a major problem in South African Higher Education Institutions. Academics are concerned about the influence of the government in their daily operation, while the government claim that they want to be accountable to the public for money spent on Higher Education. To a large extent, academics believe that the role of the government amounts to interfering rather than being accountable, and that the academic freedom of academics has been violated. The participants of the study were academics from the School of Teacher Education at the Central University of Technology, Free State. Questionnaires, documentary analysis and interviews were used as the main data collection instruments. The study revealed that a negative perception amongst academic staff existed with regard to programme re-accreditation. Furthermore, the study also established that it is still difficult for academic staff to identify the difference between the role played by the government (accountability) and as compared to academic freedom.

INTRODUCTION

Higher Education Institution (HEIs) academics are being challenged by the increasing accountability and the new higher education policies. On a national level HEIs are continually experiencing rapid changes, one of which is to be accountable ensuring that HEIs offer quality academic programmes. This dates back to the establishment of the Council of Higher Education (CHE), which then mandated its quality assurance power to the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC). The government wished to make a statement relating to the quality of education offered. Government also needed to determine if the taxpayers' money is spent wisely.

HEIs are obliged to be accountable to all stakeholders as to the quality of their academic programmes. The ''value for money'' approach places emphasis on a "good deal" for the customer or client, usually comprising the government, employer, student and parents. This requires the maintenance or improvement of academic standards of both the graduates' abilities and their research output, for the same unit of resources. There is a social and political accountability, which are concerned with issues such as programme re-accreditations and a high quality of programme offered by the HEIs. The government wanted to look at public spending as well, while also establishing as to ensure whether HEIs are in fact contributing to the development of the required skills and knowledge for the working class.

Strydom and Van der Westhuizen (2001:4) further state that HEIs must be able to explain to society at large what they are doing and demostrate how well they perform. Furthermore, institutions are confronted with the need to show their relevance, efficiency, effectiveness and quality of their teaching. Van Vaught (1994:40-44) has been arguing that the concept of accountability has two distinct dimensions: answering to the assigned mission effectively and demonstrating that these responsibilities have in fact been met.

The ongoing process of programme re-accreditation puts additional pressure on the HEIs' academics. Academics are asking themselves a number of questions relating to the relevance of the system, as well as to their academic freedom and lastly to the credibility of their peers. The big question is whether academics have accepted the

notion of being accountable to the government as stated in the Higher Education Act (101 of 1997). Being accountable in this sense means that they,. have to report to the government on their operations as such, and demonstrate that they are performing satisfactorily. The government wants to know how HEIs are using their funds and whether it is being used for the right purposes.

The article will argue from the premise of programme re-accreditation, focussing in particular on how programme re-accreditations are applied in the South African context. Furthermore, the article will look at the perception of academics dealing with programme re-accreditations. The researcher will allude to the fact that academics perceived programme re-accreditations as an addition to their current workload. They further believe that the government is taking over some of their responsibilities, which in turn deprives them of their academic freedom. However, the government views programme re-accreditation from the point of institutional accountability and as part of their monitoring process with regard to their funding. The aim of the article will be to look at the role of academics in programme re-accreditations, and furthermore, to establish whether academics accept the influence of government in programme re-accreditations.

Doherty (1997:14) further supports the approach of programme re-accreditations by saying that ''accreditation recognises the autonomy of higher education institutions and seeks to protect and uphold the institutional rights to autonomy in decision-making with regard to quality''. At the same time accreditation underlines the need to balance these institutional rights against the responsibility of higher education to address the expectations in respect of accountability (Sallis, 1994:4).

WHAT IS QUALITY?

Gone are the days when a university could rest content in the knowledge that it is a first class institution producing top-class graduates. In the modern era quality must be shown to exist and the process of monitoring quality for continuous improvement is what quality assurance is all about. To 'assure' is 'to make certain or ensure the occurrence or existence of something'. If quality is defined more simply, quality assurance is 'providing assurance that the university keeps its promises to its

customers; or that the reality lives up to the promotional material. Within quality assurance, a major concern is that of ensuring that quality is consistent throughout an institution. As the well-known saying goes, 'a chain is only as strong as its weakest link' – those responsible for quality assurance in our universities have a duty to ensure that the weakest link meets certain minimum standards (Smout, 2002:9-15).

Traditionally, the concept of quality has been associated with the notion of distinctiveness, of something special or of high class for that matter. It is quite difficult to define academic quality, however, Lategan (1999:80-81) defines it as the extent to which goals have been achieved. Ratcliff (1999:6-8) argues, that quality in the context of HEIs is bound up with the values and fundamental aims of HE. He further asserts that quality is built on the pillars of Accountability and Improvement.

Programme re-accreditation is a process used by the HEQC to accomplish at least two things: to hold the institution accountable and to improve the quality of academic programme.

Academics have their own beliefs about the way in which quality must be assured. Programme re-accreditation as one of the methods used by the HEQC is regarded as a terminal method, as the process leads to the closure of academic programme. The above-mentioned statement can be supported by the recent HEQC programme re-accreditation for the Master of Education where out of 23 universities' programmes only 7 managed to get full accreditation. This raises many questions with the academic staff of the universities that their M.Ed programme were not accredited. Academics are asking themselves whether the process was fair, as well as if the exercise had sufficient credibility.

OVERVIEW OF QUALITY ASSURANCE

The quality of higher education is becoming increasingly important to nations right across the world, seeing that these institutions represent some of the valuable resources of their countries. Nilson (1997:17) maintains that internal self-evaluation is the starting point in any quality assurance process. He further believes that it is

necessary for institutions to establish an effective internal self-evaluation routine in their organisations, because of the high degree of acceptance of ownership, which is brought about by this process.

Lategan (1997:75-80) states that an effective system of internal self-evaluation could brand the institution internationally and improve academic mobility. HEIs must be able to meet, if not exceed, the international standard. Researchers and students move from South Africa to other countries to pursue academic careers and job opportunities. The increased international mobility of students, academics and researchers leads to a growing need to understand the equivalence of qualifications, standards and credits as important aspects of quality assurance. This could further be important in the internationalisation of South African Higher Education systems, and the creation of effective internal quality assurance structures (Lategan, 1997:76). If HE can ensure that they offer quality academic programmes South African can compete with the rest of the world.

Effective internal quality assurance mechanisms (Nilson, 1997:17) can help institutions to improve their teaching and educational processes since it benefits both students and stakeholders. The good internal self-evaluation will ensure that the students acquire quality academic programmes from HEIs. Furthermore the HEIs will continuously improve the quality of their academic programmes; through this can only be done if there is effective self-evaluation taking place. Improvements can be made after identifying both strengths and weaknesses in the process of internal self-evaluation. Lategan (1997:593) elaborates on the views of Nilson (1997:17), saying that internal self-evaluation deals with all the major issues in an institution; it reflects on the ''story'' of the university and the ''hermeneutics'' of understanding that story. According to Nilson, a good internal quality assurance report should reflect on the state of the art of the quality of a particular organisation.

If higher education institutions do not adequately prepare their students to fulfil various social roles, their value in identifying individuals who are competent enough to enter the various occupation, requiring higher degrees of education and training, is lost. Thus, an educational programme that caters for both roles as mentioned above is

fundamental to the growth and development of South Africa in the twenty-first century (CHE, 2003).

Self-evaluation leading to programme re-accreditation

''Internal self-evaluation is a process undertaken by individuals or members of a group in order to reflect on their activities, achievements of objectives and performance for the purpose of facilitating improvement or planned change ''(Hay and Fourie, 1999:44).

The key foundation to a career is a lifelong learner and the ability for self-evaluation, which is a major component of learner autonomy or self-responsibility. It is with this in mind that the Operational Plan of the HEQC Founding Document states that: ''the HEQC should investigate how best to strengthen internal evaluation capacity in providers'' (CHE, 2003:15-20).

Internal self-evaluation at an institution, with the aim of developing and improving the quality of teaching and learning, involves not only the managers and academics at the institution, but all stakeholders. It is important to mention that for internal self-evaluation to have an impact on the quality of teaching in practice, there should be teaching and learning involvement at every level of the self-evaluation design and implementation, which includes learners' evaluation and facilitator's internal evaluation (Jacobs, 2000:69-74). However, self-evaluation also causes negative effects, such as tension and constraints as Jacobs (2000:69-74) observes,

- if it addresses the real needs, it produces a clear picture of existing weaknesses
- if the gap between reflection and action is bridged by the institution.

If institutions are encouraged to define their problems, to articulate their real needs and to create their own well-prepared strategy, and motivated to improve and to cultivate a problem-solving attitude, it may yet be possible to improve the quality of education at local, regional and national levels (Fourie, 2000:14-26).

According to Kells (1995: 26-31) it is internationally accepted that the basic quality assurance premise is the institutional internal self-evaluation. It is the general model

for HEI, in which the process of self-evaluation is the cornerstone and most essential element, particularly if the sustainable improvements are to be achieved over a certain period of time.   Self-evaluation is about whether educational objectives can be achieved and whether current practices can be improved upon (Brennan, Frazer and William, 1995: 5).

It is important to look at accountability as an aspect of quality assurance since the restoration of the culture of teaching, learning and management involves the creation of a culture of accountability (CHE, 2003).   HEIs should be aware of the mandate of CHE as promulgated in the Higher Education act 101 of 1997.   This includes the responsibility of the government in ensuring that they have a certain control over HEIs in South Africa.

Quality Assurance Mechanisms

In the Higher Education Act 101 of 1997 and other policy documents, except in the ETQAs where procedures are not specified, prominence is attached to internal quality and external or independent reviews/assessments as the primary procedures for balanced quality assurance.   The policy document distinguished between internal evaluation and external evaluation. According to the White Paper (1997) the primary responsibility for quality assurance rests with the higher education institutions themselves, starting with the process of internal self-evaluation. The White Paper (1997) states emphatically that self-evaluation be made an integral part of every institution, as a basis for quality assurance.   There must be a plan for internal evaluation processes indicating which functions, services, aspects or issues are at stake and how quality can be maintained.

Principles of Good Practices

In general Fredericks and Haan (2001: 519) believe that the evaluation of quality can comprise four main good practices: transparency of the education, research and administrative processes within higher education institutions; validation of standards

and qualifications obtained by students; accountability to donors, students and other stakeholders of higher education; and the improvement of the quality of education, research or administrative processes within higher education.

To make sure that funding allocated for higher education is spent wisely, and also via the value–for-money approach, each institution must be accountable to all stakeholders, i.e. students, government and the parents. The fostering of accountability usually takes place through external, independent peer reviews or audits of institutions and faculties, programmes. One of the main tasks of the peers or auditors is to provide externally accessible information on how the funding has contributed to the educational achievements.

The principles of good practices are based on the following aspect:

- Transparency of the education, research and administrative process within higher education institutions
- Validation of standards and qualifications obtained by students
- Accountability to donors, students and other stakeholders of higher education; and the improvement of the quality of education
- External evaluation-related to improvement.

Self-evaluation is the foundation of quality assurance, especially because sound self-evaluation is a prerequisite for quality improvement.

The following section will explain the methodology undertaken in this study.

RESEARCH METHODS

The population, sample and research design are described below followed by a section on data collection. A systems approach to quality assurance and internal evaluation which is also considered, and later translated to programme re-

accreditation.

The aim of the empirical survey was to gather information from the academic staff with regard to their experience in dealing with programme re-accreditation. The purpose of the empirical study was therefore to obtain the opinions of respondents by means of a survey.

A descriptive survey was employed to study HEIs in particular academics in the School of Teacher Education (SOTE) at Central University of Technology, Free State (CUT). Lecturers from the SOTE in CUT were included in order to ascertain which factors influenced the development of self-evaluation.

From twenty-two academics in the SOTE, ten were requested to complete a four-point scale questionnaire, as well as to attend an interview session, in order to furnish the information required by the questionnaire. The reason for selecting a certain sample was based on the fact that the School of Teacher Education was the only School evaluated by the HEQC for programme re-accreditation at CUT. Furthermore, the researcher observed that academics from SOTE had an advantage over others, as they had already participated in two site visits of programme re-accreditation.

Three basic data-gathering techniques were used in this study, i.e. departmental profile, questionnaires and interviews.

The researcher chose to use the questionnaire as the principal data-collecting instrument, because of its validity and also to ensure that the sample can contribute extensively to the study. Geyser and Wolhuter (2000:93-94) argue, that no other data collection tool is used more frequently in social research. The questionnaire allows respondents more time and it can be completed whenever it suits them. The questionnaires were distributed to the lecturers that participated during the site visits. Most of the questions required prior knowledge of participation in the programme re-accreditations.

A four-point Likert scale questionnaire was designed. The questions were factual in nature, relating to the respondents' background and their academic experience. In this regard, the respondents were asked to indicate their opinions on a 1-4 scale

(where 1 = strongly agree; 2 = agree; 3 = disagree; and 4 = strongly disagree) for items relating to various aspects of departmental self-evaluation (internal evaluation). The researcher was interested in testing the following aspects:

- The role of lecturers in programme accreditations
- Their expectations with regard to programme re-accreditations
- Their participation in internal self-evaluation
- Their experience in Higher Education
- Evaluation of the site

In total ten copies of the questionnaire were distributed among selected lecturers in the School of Teacher Education. A covering letter was attached to each questionnaire, explaining the purpose of the questionnaire, and the eventual benefits to the respondents in particular, and the quality assurance in general. For recognition purposes and to ensure that lecturers participated fully, the covering letter was printed on an official Central University of Technology, Free State letterhead.

To address the above-mentioned, a carefully planned questionnaire was developed. The questionnaire was divided into three sections. Different questions were included in each section, asking for instance the number of re-accreditation visits to the unit institutions.

The interview design was used as a supplementary data-gathering instrument in addition to the questionnaire and documentary analysis. The researcher decided to use a semi-structured interview because of its informal status. The respondents were free to mention their experience with regard to the site visits. The above-mentioned interviews were conducted with academic staff.

Departmental Profile

The nature of this study also involved the collection of self-evaluation reports from the Quality Units of the institutions. The purpose of collecting the reports was the of triangulation with regard to the data collected through the questionnaires and interviews. In some ways, self-evaluation reports provided additional data, which had

been collected by means of the questionnaires and interviews. The reports received from the Quality Unit Department helped the researcher to control the accuracy of external quality provider reports, as well as self-evaluation profile.

The researcher was interested in establishing out if the School of Teacher Education, has indeed attended to the comments made in the previous self-evaluation. In the self-evaluation reports the School normally indicates certain areas as they require improvements or are in the stage of being improved. The main idea was to establish whether the improvements plan appearing in the self-evaluation reports had indeed taken place and to what extent.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Of the ten academics, who had received questionnaires, sent 10 (or 100%) responded. Out of the 10 responses, 6 academics had more that 5 years' experience in HE, while the other 4 academics have less than 2 years working experience in HE. Academics felt that this process is very strenuous and it consumes most of their time. Especially in the case novice lecturers, as they were still battling to establish themselves in the HE sector.

The above-mentioned statistics give an indication of how the process of programme re-accreditation really affected the daily activities of the academics' work. The academics felt that the HEQC is imposing a number of issues in the daily operation, 8 respondents mentioned that at the moment there were so many things that they had to do, one being designing their teaching and learning material in an outcomes-based format. All 10 respondents felt that they were in the position to apply the institution's teaching and learning policy, therefore it was not necessary to organiser training.

In comparison to teaching and learning, one criterion that is of the utmost importance in programme re-accreditation, is the students assessment. All academics replied that they were in a position to apply the assessment policy of the institution. In addition to that, 5 respondents alluded to the fact that they were qualified assessors. Probing further, 8 academics mentioned that they did not use the South African Qualification

Authority (SAQA) level descriptors when pitching the assessment level of students' achievements.

The academics felt that during programme re-accreditation there was some hidden agenda behind the scope of this important exercise. It was interesting to note that academics questioned the validity of the exercise as well as the way the review panel was constituted. During the interview sessions academics mentioned that this re-accreditation process was influencing their work negatively, for instance if the School lost the accreditation of a programme that would affect their jobs. It was important to note that 6 academics had a negative perception about the exercise; in particular senior academics, for they felt that the government wanted to implement the 1996 National Plan for Higher Education (NCHE). The plan clearly categorised universities according to a certain status. This is supported by the result of the previous re-accreditation programme in the Teacher Education Programme.

The lecturers feel that the HEQC is definitely not developmental in its approach, meaning that, it is not willing to credit initial and emerging efforts towards the provision of an qualification in Teacher Development. All the faults and short comings identified in the previous national teacher review programmes do not constitute any terminal effect on any student's learning, nor did it destroy any effort by anybody. Therefore the HEQC should perhaps suggest an improvements plan, rather than closing the programme, as it would affect the students negatively. These efforts merely fall short of achieving the goal of being developmental in its approach. Under the circumstances, lecturers raised the concern that the approach was lacking, as it was not conducive to achieving the required standard in Higher Education.

CONCLUSION

One critical question that the article wanted to address was the role of academics in the programmes re-accreditation process, as well as to establishing whether they understood the role of the government in this whole exercise. Instead of probing one question and getting an answer, the researcher found that the academics had multiple issues regarding programme re-accreditation. The whole exercise of programme re-accreditation starts with programme self-evaluation. Literature has indicated that

programme re-accreditations is evidence-based evaluation. The programme is evaluated according to the agreed criteria in the programme Accreditation Framework Hand Book. The programme is evaluated according to what they claim in the self-evaluation document prepared by the institution.

The academics believe that the government predetermines the results of programme re-accreditation. They further believe that the government is applying the recommendation of NCHE. It was quite interesting to listen to academics, particularly when they supported the view that the recommendation of NCHE in terms of categorising the university is not something of the past. It is important that the issue of academic freedom must be read in conjunction with institutional autonomy. The government has a huge responsibility in ensuring that the subsidies allocated to HEI are utilised for a good cause, and that are also accountable to the taxpayers.

It was interesting to note that although academics want to participate in the programme re-accreditation however, they still have a fear of failure. Those fears foster a negative re-accreditation concept among academics in HE. For that matter, academics will create a platform to hide their failure. A numbered statement will be made with regard to among others, the credibility of the re-accreditation process as well as the constitution of peer reviews. The article further recommends that the first step in programme re-accreditation should perhaps be in the form of improvement or enhancement of quality. This will be a good buy-in approach for most, if not all academics. The idea was to use the self-evaluation as an improvement tool but from the data it was clear that academics had overrated their programme to a large extent, and that they were even disappointed with the outcomes of the re-accreditations.

The HEQC should perhaps run a pilot study on some new mechanisms, particularly in grading the criteria for programme re-accreditation that will help to standardise the criteria for outcomes projections.

The above response from academics touched on some salient points raised by the HEQC, but the fact of the matter is that this evaluation was too harsh, too a-historical and totally missed and/or negated the bigger picture. The point is, if a programme is

withdrawn, the institution will finally not provide the program. Surely the stakeholders will lose in terms of being afforded the opportunity to equip themselves with the required skills. The education system will lose greatly, and there will be a backlog among stakeholders. If the programme is not accredited, this would also affect the response of the province to knowledge economy, and it will retard progress to levels never reached. The growing level of knowledge and conceptual sophistication being nurtured in the province and country will generally be lost and we may soon find ourselves having to import expertise from outside the country soon.

There is a mismatch between the government intent on programme re-accreditation and the perception of the academics.

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