Improving Quality in Higher Education: A Reflection on External and Internal Programme Reviews

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Abstract

'Improvement' and 'maintenance' of quality in higher education are buzzwords in the discourse on higher education in both emerging and mature economies. Globally, schools and universities make efforts to produce students of high calibre who will excel as citizens and active participants in the global marketplace. At the institutional and national level, these attempts include internal and external quality assurance of education programmes and institutions. In South Africa, the Higher Education Qualifications Committee of the Council on Higher Education assures the quality of higher education programmes through a system of external programme reviews. This process often leads to institutions and education programmes acquiring or losing their accreditation status. Programme reviews are also undertaken internally in institutions. Although internal and external review systems have been in place in South Africa for a number of years, not many institutions have reflected on how they impact on the quality of education. In this study, eight academics reflected on these reviews, with the goal of determining which review had more impact than the other in maintaining quality in education. Because there were a greater number of limitations identified in external reviews than there were in internal reviews, it could be inferred that academics supported the latter. Hence, in this study, it is recommended that internal reviews should be strengthened and conducted regularly in order to raise quality in higher education.

Keywords: quality assurance, quality, impact, internal, external, programme review, higher education

Introduction

In both emerging and mature economies, ensuring high quality education through external programme reviews or quality assurance of education programmes offered by higher education institutions (HEIs) is receiving substantial emphasis. Part of the reason for this is that higher education is regarded as a viable means of enabling every country and its citizens to become members of the emerging knowledge society (Sanyal & Martin 2007). It equips individuals with skills and knowledge that guarantee them better employment in the market economy of the globalised world (Naidoo 2003). International interest in quality education is encapsulated in international organisations such as the 2008 UNESCO Global Forum on International Quality Assurance, Accreditation and the Recognition of Qualifications; the 2007 Global University Network for Innovation; the 1999 Bologna Declaration of Italy; the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in the United Kingdom; the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) and the National Assessment and Accreditation Council in India.

Both nationally and internationally, the twenty-first century has experienced an explosion in the number of students entering higher education, paralleled with an increasingly growing demand for access to higher education. Massification of higher education has inevitably led to a proliferation of diverse and unscrupulous fly-by-night, unaccredited private education providers that promise to offer high quality distance, online and on-site education programmes to potential students (Council on Higher Education (CHE) 2004; Department of Higher Education & Training 2012; Thobega 2010). Thobega (2010) warns against private institutions: some of them offer virtual programmes in which students enrol privately online so that it is difficult to guarantee the quality of their programmes. Consequently, there is a high possibility of their programmes being substandard (Thobega 2010). Owing to this, the demand for quality assurance and accreditation of HEIs and the programmes offered in them has intensified as a means of protecting the demands and interests of consumers (students, prospective employers, societies and institutions themselves) and of ensuring high quality in standards and excellence in higher education (Sanyal & Martin 2007). Referring to the assurance that can be given to an institution to prove that it is not fraudulent and that the degree it awards is credible, Sanyal and Martin (2007: 6) claim that 'accreditation is one way of providing that guarantee'.

South Africa is not immune to the demands for high quality education that are made by multiple stakeholders. According to Singh (2004):

> *[South African] stakeholders also require that higher education institutions are able to provide the public with comprehensive information on the manner in which they maintain quality and standards of their core academic activities, and to demonstrate sustained improvement in this regard. Institutional audits serve to address both sets of issues.*

In the context of South Africa, the Preamble to the Higher Education Act 1997 (Act No. 101 of 1997) emphasises the desirability of pursuing excellence in higher education. To realise this ideal, the Higher Education Act of 1997 assigned the responsibility of quality assurance and accreditation in South African higher education to the Council on Higher Education (CHE), which was launched in May 2001. The CHE discharges its mandate through its permanent sub-committee called the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC). The HEQC, like other quality assurers internationally, conducts audits and accreditation of education programmes offered in HEIs, with the purpose of improving and maintaining sustainable quality. In the document entitled 'Institutional Audit Framework' (CHE 2004), the functions of the HEQC are spelled out: first, to promote quality assurance in higher education, second, to audit quality assurance mechanisms of institutions of higher education and third, to accredit programmes of higher education. The HEQC has added quality development workshops for staff from HEIs to these functions. What sets the CHE/HEQC apart from other international quality-assurance agencies is that it functions in a previously racially divided South Africa that is recovering from inequalities of opportunity, access to higher education and the scars left by the apartheid system. Therefore, it is mindful of discharging its quality-assurance mandate in line with the transformation objectives of higher education institutions.

Research Problem

External and internal reviews or quality assurance of programmes, as commonly referred to in South Africa, and accreditation, have been

extensively researched and critiqued in South Africa and beyond (Motala 2001; Borman 2004; Fourie 2000; Mhlanga 2008; Carrim 2013). Not many studies have been conducted in which HEIs or their constituencies reflect on these processes. In a country such as South Africa with students from vastly different backgrounds, there is a need for institutions to engage in robust reflections on these processes. Reflection leads to improvement. By engaging in reflection, HEIs may be able to determine the efficacy of programme reviews and identify gaps in these processes that can potentially compromise the quality in education. The only reflection on the external programme review and accreditation processes was undertaken by the CHE (CHE 2010).

Purpose

This study involved eight academics at a particular HEI in an emerging economy who reflected on two programme reviews conducted in their faculty: one external and the other internal. The external review and accreditation of the programme had been conducted by the HEQC and its team of reviewers in 2007, while the internal review of the other programme had been conducted in 2013 by a mixed panel of reviewers from both inside and outside the institution's Faculty of Education. The purpose of this study was to give academics an opportunity to reflect on their actions and those of the review panel that had occurred before, during and after the reviews. The objective was to establish whether actions had been carried out well and to identify lacunae that could compromise or negatively impact on the quality of our education programmes. The other objective was to determine which, between internal and external programme reviews, had more impact on improving quality in education than the other. As the author of this paper, I was one of the eight academics who engaged in reflective action.

During reflection, we looked back, compared and contrasted phenomena as they had unfolded in the two programme reviews in which we had participated. The research questions were: (from the perspective of the academics) (i) what is the scale of the impact of external and internal review processes on the quality of educational programmes offered by HEIs, and (ii) which of the two programme reviews (internal and external) has more impact on improving the quality of education programmes than the other?

The first thesis of this study was that vital as external programme

reviews and accreditation are, unless institutions and organisms within them (such as academic and support staff, students and tutors) internalise standards and commit to continuous improvement, or adopt an 'internal culture of quality' (Grossman, Sands & Brittingham 2010: 104), high quality in HEI educational programmes will remain elusive. Therefore, emphasis on continuing internal quality assurance of educational programmes should be placed primarily on the academics and HEIs themselves and to a lesser degree on external systems. Therefore, in the current study, internal quality assurance measures take centre stage. The second thesis was that reflection should be an integral component that is incorporated in all internal and external quality-assurance related processes because it may enhance the quality of education programmes, regardless of whether they are offered in emerging or mature economies. The hypothesis of this study was that emerging economies face more dilemmas related to underdevelopment with regard to external programme reviews and accreditation than their counterparts in mature economies.

Context of the Study

Having an integrated quality assurance system that operates outside institutions is not unique to South Africa but is a common global trend. In line with trends in the developed world, education programmes offered in emerging economies, such as South Africa, undergo quality assurance through internal and external reviews. During the period 2005-2007, the HEQC conducted its first 81 programme reviews and accreditation in the country's 21 public HEIs. The four programmes subjected to this process were located within the Faculties of Education of these institutions. They included the Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE), Bachelor of Education (B. Ed), Master of Education (M. Ed) and Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE). Our University of Technology (UoT) was among those institutions whose education programmes were reviewed. During the 2007 external programme reviews I coordinated seven programmes, one of which had been selected for the review and accreditation process. This programme was one of the 23 programmes reviewed in this category in 2007. The internal review was conducted in 2013 on two education programmes, one for which I was acting as head of department (HoD) in the Faculty of Education at the time. External reviews included the accreditation component whereas

internal reviews did not. These external and internal programme reviews form the basis of this study.

Theoretical Framework

As stated earlier, this study involved an intentional reflection on the external and internal reviews of two educational programmes offered in a Faculty of Education located within a UoT in South Africa. In the light of the reflective actions and processes undertaken, reflection theory informed this study. Dewey (1933) is widely recognised as the founder of the concept of reflection in the twentieth century. He regarded reflection as a way of thinking about or solving a problem, which involved action chaining. Thus, according to him, reflection is an active and deliberative cognitive process which involves reflective thinking and reflective action. Similarly, educators involved in this study made a deliberate effort to think back (or reflect) on the external and internal programme reviews that had been undertaken in 2007 and 2013, with the goal of identifying what had worked or not worked in their actions and those of the review panel in relation to improving the quality of education.

Schön (1983; 1987) presents two forms of reflection: reflection-in-action, which he describes as reflection that happens while action is still occurring; and reflection-on-action, which he defines as reflection that occurs after the event. Two types of reflection apply in this study; they both involve meta-cognition or thinking about thinking. In other words, educators involved in this study thought about what had happened before, during and after reviews of their educational programmes. The reflection process included not only the phenomena that occurred before the reviews began, but what happened during and after the reviews had been completed.

According to Schön (1983; 1987), through reflection and action, professionals are bound to make rational judgements about how to modify their actions and find new ways of doing them while in action (reflection-in-action) or after the action has occurred (reflection-on-action). Clearly, the reflective action undertaken in this study helped academics who had been involved in the review of the said programmes to make rational judgements about how they would modify and improve their educational practices in order to improve the quality of their education programmes.

Literature Review
Conceptual Definition of Quality
At the heart of quality assurance and accreditation is the concept of quality. The term 'quality' is used loosely in the education arena without any consensus on what it exactly means. Part of the reason is that there are multiple stakeholders in education with diverse understandings of the meaning of quality (Borman 2004). Borman asserts that 'all these actors have their own, sometimes conflicting interpretations of quality, with the result that it becomes more difficult to arrive at a standard definition' (p.374). Hindle (2013: 346) holds the same view, that 'definitions of quality education are not as self-evident as some would believe. Instead, they may well be a point of contestation and debate, as different constituencies express their views on the purpose of education, and on what quality education would mean in respect of these views'.

Hindle raises an important point, that while quality must relate to the context in which it is applied, it is important to keep cognisance of the globalising world and hence, of a search for a universal definition of quality. Carrim (2013: 39) concurs with Borman and Hindle, that there is no consensus on the definition of the concept of quality in South Africa and the world over. He contends that defining the concept of 'quality' and 'education quality' 'is by no means straightforward': as questions such as 'quality for what?', 'quality for whom?' or 'quality in relation to what?' need to be asked because the meaning of the concept of quality is elusive. Since there is no universally accepted definition of quality, it stands to reason that it cannot be measured with certainty either. Towards this end, Carrim (2013: 40) concludes that 'quality is not a clear-cut issue and measuring it is not straightforward either', a fact supported by Meyer and Hofmeyr (1995). It makes sense, therefore, to conclude that measurement of education quality is fraught with challenges (Sanyal & Martin 2007) and that the process of quality assurance and improvement can be a difficult undertaking.

Internal and External Reviews
Sanyal and Martin (2007) distinguish between internal and external quality assurance. Internal quality assurance is provided by an institution auditing itself or its programmes whereas external quality assurance is that which is undertaken by an organization external to the institution. In the South African

context, the quality assurance and accreditation system serves as a means of determining whether, in the case of internal quality assurance, programmes or institutions meet their own objectives and standards as determined by their mission and vision. In the case of external reviews, the system determines whether programmes or institutions meet a set of standards or criteria against which they are measured, as predetermined and evaluated by the HEQC.

In measuring education quality, the HEQC adopts three principles, that is: fitness of purpose, fitness for purpose (CHE 2010; Fourie, van der Westhuizen, Alt & Holtzhausen 2010; Sanyal & Martin 2007; Thobega 2010; Grossman *et al.* 2010) and transformation (CHE 2010). According to the CHE (2010:3), the principle of fitness of purpose determines 'whether the training offered by the reviewed programmes is appropriate to the specific conditions of teaching and learning in South Africa'. The principle of fitness for purpose determines whether the programmes are offered at the appropriate level with corresponding support, resources and organisation. This principle addresses the fitness of institutions/departments/faculties for offering respective programmes (CHE 2010; Sanyal & Martin 2007). Lastly, the principle of transformation is subsumed under the two (CHE 2010). As mentioned earlier, South Africa serves students, the majority of whom during the apartheid era, had limited or no access to higher education. The principle of transformation helps to determine whether the programmes offered by South African HEIs match the country's context and whether the challenges of transformation are met (CHE 2010; Sanyal & Martin 2007).

Methodology

After the external and internal reviews of our educational programmes had passed, I invited seven colleagues who had been involved in both these processes during 2007 and 2013 to engage in a reflective action. During the reflection, we had to think back on the phenomena that had occurred during the two reviews to which our two education programmes had been subjected. The reflection process was based on the three main HEQC quality-assurance stages that we used as our guiding principle during the brainstorming and reflective processes. These stages included developing a desktop self-evaluation report; the quality-assurance and validation process and outcomes of the review. We brainstormed ideas step by step, beginning with reflecting on how we had addressed each quality-assurance stage vis-à-vis the actions

of the review panel, as well as how we felt about how the panel had judged us at each stage. We reflected on the review process in relation to how we thought it had impacted on the review outcomes, as well as ways in which we, as agents of change, could improve on these processes. During the reflection, we jotted down ideas on a flipchart.

After we had exhausted the ideas, I collated them and used a mind-map to compare, contrast and categorise them. This was the first phase of data analysis. I analysed data using deductive qualitative analysis (DQA) (Gilgun 2011; Acock, van Dulmen, Allen & Piercy 2005 in Bengtson, Acock, Allen, Dilworth-Anderson & Klein 2005). In DQA, researchers employ a theoretical framework to structure their research. The three quality-assurance stages mentioned earlier became *a priori* codes that guided the analysis of this research.

Axial coding helped refine common emergent themes from the categories I had developed. I colour-coded the themes, re-categorised, re-grouped them and placed them under the *a priori* codes. Gilgun describes negative case analysis (NCA) as a procedure which helps researchers to look for data that does not fit the theory. During data collection and analysis, I conducted NCA to check for data that did not fit the three HEQC quality-assurance stages. I could not find any data that was not commensurate with these *a priori* codes. Using DQA helped me to focus my research question. I used member checking to enhance the validity and credibility of my data analysis.

Before the reflection process began, I had made ethical considerations of obtaining permission from my colleagues to develop this reflection process into research. After they had granted me permission to proceed, and before the reflection commenced, they signed the consent forms. I explained the anonymity clause to them and informed them that during the course of the study, I would store data in a safe place and destroy it after the study had been published. I obtained ethical clearance from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education in which this study was based.

Results

This section includes an analytical discussion of the outcomes of the reflection process that took place on the external and internal programme

reviews. As stated earlier, the analysis was conducted using the three HEQC stages mentioned in the methodology. These stages became *a priori* codes on which the study results were hinged. In this section, it is important to provide a concise definition of each *a priori* code, followed by an analytical summary of results related to each code.

Development of the Desktop Self-evaluation Report

Akin to the requirements of accreditation in both emerging and mature economies, a programme or institution under review develops a review or audit portfolio which it uses to evaluate itself. The evidence contained in the portfolio is validated by the external review panel to determine if the target areas of the programme reviewed meet predetermined quality standards. Oosthuizen (2003: 4) argues that 'the heart of the [quality assurance] process is self-evaluation'. The HEQC emphasises that self-evaluation should be credible and reflect the true status of the quality of the programmes undergoing quality assurance and accreditation; its outcomes should strive to match those of the review panel. Singh (2004: Foreword), on the one hand, states that 'Institutional responsibility for credible self-evaluation and sustained improvement remains at the heart of the HEQC's institutional audit system'. Woodhouse (2001: 23), on the other hand, advocates that 'meaningful institutional self-evaluation assessment depends on openness, truthfulness and risk-taking if problems are to be identified and solved'.

Upon reflection, all of us all felt that, during both reviews, we had striven to be as honest as we possibly could in the self-evaluation reports. However, having recently written a self-evaluation report for internal review of our programme, we realised that it was easier to be more candid when conducting self-evaluation for internal, as opposed to external, programme review. For some reason, we realised that the pressure of being judged negatively in internal review was lighter than when the programme had been reviewed externally.

The other issue relates to inclusiveness and ownership of the programme review process. We all noted that when preparations for external programme review were made, the responsibility had appeared to fall heavily on the shoulders of the heads of departments, programme coordinators and the Dean; less so on the lecturers, students and other stakeholders. Arguing

for inclusion of lecturers in the review process, Borman (2004: 382) states that 'Staff plays a decisive role in quality assurance and should receive adequate recognition for their contributions to efficient teaching'. During preparation for our external programme review, we noticed that the majority of lecturers had been minimally involved, such as when they had to collate and submit evidence, which is another requirement of the accreditation process. We believed that some of the lecturers had not been aware of the contents of the self-evaluation report before the review process had begun. Nonetheless, they had been interviewed by the HEQC panel of reviewers.

In contrast, we recognised that the self-evaluation report we had recently prepared for the internal programme review had been more inclusive. Before the report was written, the academic staff in our programme had held a two-day workshop in which they brainstormed each criterion and compiled ideas. Similarly, the report-writing process involved all those who had been interested in participating in this activity. Since the process was democratic and lecturers had been made part of the whole process, we acknowledged that they were more likely to sense ownership of the internal review process than the external review in which they had played no part. As a group, we decided that in the next series of reviews, it would be important to repeat the bottom-up approach we had employed in the internal review.

Other stakeholders included in the external programme reviews had been students and their leaders, as it related to participating in the interviews held by the review panel. Other than this involvement, we recognised that they had not been invited to make any input in the writing of the self-evaluation report. Borman (2004: 377) cites Strydom and Lategan who emphasise the input of students, because they are beneficiaries of the reviews. Reiterating this point, Borman (2004: 382) contends that 'Student input ought to be considered as a very important aspect of programme reviewing. Students themselves are the best authorities on their own local environments and are therefore the most obvious people to participate in successful programme reviewing'. In addition, we conceded that stakeholders such as alumni, school principals and advisory committees had participated minimally in the interviews due to other commitments.

Our reflection led us to conclude that, during the internal programme reviews, we had democratised the process by having the academic staff, students and other stakeholders participate fully and actively. Students had been involved in making inputs during brainstorming sessions. They had

been requested to read the self-evaluation report and make contributions before it was submitted to the review panel, as well as before the actual review process had commenced. We had invited stakeholders such as members of the advisory committee, alumni and current students to participate in the interviews set up for internal reviews. We felt that no-one had been neglected: the internal review process had been highly inclusive.

The Quality-assurance and Validation Process

The external review and validation process by a panel of experts includes site visitation by a panel of peers and experts. Although the HEQC is a permanent committee of the CHE, it does not have a permanent staff but operates with its committee members who are either affiliated with other institutions or retired professionals. With the exception of the CHE permanent staff, the peers and experts who serve on the review panels are HEQC members and volunteers employed by different institutions. Before the programme review panel is selected, potential reviewers submit CVs which help in determining their credentials and expertise. The limitation of the CV is that, in the interest of serving on the HEQC, candidates can inflate and overestimate their levels of expertise.

In line with the standards of external programme reviews and accreditation processes and practices globally, the HEQC followed the procedures that were, to a large extent, similar to the international quality assurance systems. Before the 2007 programme reviews commenced, the HEQC provided academics from various institutions with capacity-building workshops on the processes related to external programme reviews and accreditation. The panel briefed us on the three main review and accreditation steps, namely, preparation of a self-evaluation report, visit by the panel, and review/accreditation outcomes. As participants in these workshops, we felt that we were equipped with essential skills that empowered us to face the unfamiliar external review processes.

Similarly, before the 2013 internal programme review took place, we had a four-day training workshop on this process, which we acknowledged had strengthened us. The difference was that in the latter, we went through all the categories of the evaluation process together as staff. We brainstormed ideas on how to address each of them, whereas in the former, only those who

were going to be involved in the review process attended the workshops: some academics needed these skills but were excluded. In the latter case, we had a scribe to compile the ideas we had brainstormed collectively. Upon reflection, we found that these activities had facilitated the writing of the desktop evaluation report and had made the internal programme review democratic, leading to a buy-in, ownership and support for the review process. We appreciated the fact that academics who had been involved in the 2007 reviews were willing to offer assistance and to take on the leading role in this process, such as writing the desktop evaluation report and coordinating collection of evidence.

In hindsight, we realised that on both occasions, not having a unified understanding of the meaning of quality had not become a challenge for us. We had not even collectively engaged with the meaning of this concept as in both instances, time was against us. Our main concern and priority had been to write and finish the self-evaluation reports while simultaneously collecting evidence. Rather than focussing on the definitions, we had instead used our general understanding of the concept. We understood that we had relied heavily on the minimum standards set out in the HEQC documents for each criterion to guide our understanding of the meaning of this concept. As a reflection group, we highlighted the importance of having a common and collective definition and understanding of this concept: doing so can help us to work towards a common goal with a clear vision of what we want to achieve.

In the case of external programme reviews, before the process began, we had received the schedule of the review process which included a list of reviewers. This process had given us a chance to scrutinise the reviewers so that we could indicate to the HEQC if there were potential conflicts of interest. Basically, this process facilitated transparency and allowed us to indicate if there was a reviewer or reviewers whom we felt should be excluded from reviewing our programme; obviously based on solid reasons, the main of which was conflict of interest. Upon reflecting on the internal reviews, we noted that we had obtained the list of the names of external reviewers but not of the internal reviewers.

The external review process lasted for four days, including the arrival and departure days. CHE/HEQC states that it can last for two or three days. Considering the large scope of the external programme review, we argued that the panel of six members was relatively small; compared with twelve in

the internal review. During our reflection, we questioned both the limited duration and the panel size of the external review process. In essence, these issues raised serious concerns and questions to us about the credibility of external reviews. One question that came to mind was: how was it possible to do justice to the quality assurance of a programme within such a limited period of time and with such a small panel making quality-related judgements of our programme against so many criteria? Consequently, we were led to conclude that this process relies heavily on the self-evaluation report, evidence sources and short interviews without making an in-depth and well-informed analysis of each programme. We contended that reliance on these information sources, and making judgements based on such data within such a limited period of time weakens the external review process and subjects it to doubt and mistrust. Our concern was that this situation can potentially lead institutions that feel unfairly judged to take legal action against the HEQC, especially if they feel strongly about the credibility of their programmes in terms of quality.

Legally, HEIs have inalienable rights to dispute the outcome of the review process and to file a lawsuit against the review agency, as has been the case with one South African HEI. Consequently, we came to the realisation that external programme reviews and accreditation are political and legal processes that need to be handled professionally and with immense care. During our reflection, we held that the internal reviews, although they had been much better than external reviews with regard to the size of the panel, were, however, equally limited regarding the duration of two days. We questioned the involvement of a former colleague who had been teaching in our programme a few months before the internal review process. We felt that his inclusion had presented a high conflict of interest and in our view, jeopardised the transparency and objectivity of the review process.

We also raised the point that the external programme reviews had been too formal for our liking. We understood that access to the review panel had to be strictly controlled in order to avoid interference with the review process. However, we unanimously felt that some review panel members had been aloof and lacked collegiality, while others had been intimidating, confrontational and antagonistic in their interview approach. This could be a reflection of the power dynamics that prevail in the quality assurance and accreditation of programmes. During the reflection, we agreed that the bureaucratic approach to programme reviews had made it difficult for us to

think logically during the interviews. In contrast, we concurred that during the internal reviews, although the panel had asked equally difficult questions, their approach had been collegial, which we believed had made us feel valued for the contributions we had made to the institution and had helped us to grow as individuals.

With regard to diversity, our observation was that the internal review panel had been more diverse than the external one, consisting of reviewers from other HEIs, representatives from the Department of Basic Education involved with the senior phase that is part of our programme, and staff from our Learning Centre. Even though we had learnt a great deal from both instances, as a collective group, we felt that had the conditions been similar, we would not have been as sceptical about external programme reviews as we were during our reflection. The opposite was true about internal reviews. As a group we felt empowered by internal reviews and agreed that we would welcome them even if they were conducted annually. The conclusion one can infer is that the academics involved in this study advocated for internal reviews.

During the reflection, we noticed that the last external reviews had been undertaken in 2007, which had been six years earlier. This lack of frequency raised our concerns about the effectiveness of these reviews. Our argument was founded on the fact that the HEQC was failing to monitor what was happening in the HEIs that had obtained accreditation before. We concurred that relying on external reviews as quality-assurance measures can be risky. Therefore, we came to a conclusion that since we could not rely on external programme reviews as tools for improving quality, our faculty should conduct internal reviews at least every three years because, unlike external reviews, conducting them apparently costs less than conducting the latter.

Outcome of the Review

During HEQC programme reviews and accreditation, education programmes are evaluated against 19 criteria with which they have to comply. These criteria include aspects such as programme design, staffing, teaching and learning, recruitment of staff and students, resources and assessment. During reflection, we acknowledged that in our self-evaluation, we had addressed

these criteria individually in the report. The review panel used the same criteria to make decisions on whether our programme complied with the set criteria. The HEQC accreditation process is based on four assessment criteria which yield four different outcomes, depending on the extent to which the programmes have met minimum standards of quality (CHE 2010). Two of the assessment criteria are 'exceeds minimum standards' and 'complies with minimum standards', the outcome of which is accreditation of programmes. The other criterion 'needs improvement' leads to accreditation with conditions while 'does not meet minimum standards' leads to withdrawal of accreditation.

After the review has been completed, the HEQC issues a panel review report which spells out the accreditation status the programme has received. Programmes that obtain accreditation with conditions have to develop a quality improvement action plan of how they are going to improve the target areas in which they failed to meet the set standards. Ideally, the HEQC is supposed to provide continued monitoring and evaluation of the quality of the programmes that have obtained this status. The withdrawal of programme accreditation means that those programmes cannot continue to be offered and have to be terminated. According to the HEQC, programmes with full accreditation can apply for, and be granted, self-accreditation status for a period of six years (CHE 2004). However, self-accreditation can be controversial sometimes and can create suspicion among those institutions that do not qualify for it.

The outcome of the 2007 external reviews of our education programme was 'needs improvement'. This meant that we had to develop a quality improvement action plan based on the conditions set out by the HEQC. We did not dispute the judgement made by the review panel, implying that we considered the judgement fair. After submitting the quality improvement action plan after six months, our programme received full accreditation. Since there was no accreditation status attached to the internal review process, we received only a lengthy report from the review panel via our Learning Centre. The report specified the outcome of the reviews, highlighting the criteria we had or had not met. We were required to write an improvement action report on how we were going to improve the areas in which we had not met the minimum criteria. Seeing that it was close to the end of the year, we planned to write the report in 2014.

Upon reflecting on the outcomes of the two reviews, we all agreed

that not obtaining full accreditation the first time had brought a lot of stress to the academic staff involved in the programme, but especially to the Programme Coordinator who had to deal with all the work related to that process. Nonetheless, we acknowledged that having gone through the review and accreditation processes full circle no longer felt like a burden. Instead, we admitted that it became as attractive as the accreditation status we had earned. Grossman *et al.* (2010: 104) confirm this view, stating that 'when the standards appear high in line with the institution's mission, and the process promises [positive] feedback from respected peers, actually going through accreditation can be as attractive as the status to be earned'. With regard to the outcome of the internal review, we expressed the feeling that some omissions had been made, just as it had been the case with the external reviews. Hence, before embarking on writing the action plan, we believed omissions had to be addressed by the panel. Although we believed that the internal review report on outcomes had to be taken seriously, we acknowledgeed that we were not feeling as stressed as we had been with the outcomes of the external review. In hindsight, we believed we should have written the action plan before the same year (2013), as the following year (2014) in which we had planned to complete it was quickly swamped by new challenges.

Conclusion

This study comprises a reflection of academic staff on the external and internal programme reviews that had been conducted in 2007 and 2013 into the two education programmes in which they taught. The goal was to examine the impact of these reviews on the quality of education. The reflection was used as a tool for identifying what had been done well or not well in both processes so as to find improvement solutions and to determine which of the two reviews had more impact on improving quality of education. Judging by the positive remarks the academics expressed about internal programme reviews and the number of limitations they identified in external reviews, it is safe to conclude that they advocated internal reviews. The concerns about external reviews raised by the academics in this study could justify the new direction or approach that the CHE is taking; the Quality Enhancement Project (QEP) that will be employed in the HEQC Second Quality Assurance cycle (CHE 2013). This Project appears to be non-

invasive and non-threatening: it emphasises the supportive rather than evaluative role of programme reviews. If used together with internal reviews, this Project has a potential for improving quality in higher education. Nonetheless, it does require HEIs to conduct regular internal reviews so that they can identify gaps on which interventions through the QEP could be made. There is a need for HEIs to reflect constantly on their processes and strengthen the internal reviews.

The hypothesis of this study was that quality assurance systems in emerging economies present more challenges than in emerging economies. Although this study could not confirm or refute this hypothesis, judging from the results of this study, there are signs that fault-lines exist in the quality assurance and accreditation systems of South Africa. This situation is confirmed by Sanyal and Martin who claim that developing countries lack capable human resources and financial resources to conduct or sustain efficient quality assurance processes. Although the sample was small, this study presents important policy issues that need to be addressed with more elaborate samples.

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