

The Influence of the HEQC's Institutional Audits on Teaching and Learning at Three South African Universities

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Abstract

Institutional audits constitute one of the ways through which South Africa's Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) executes its quality assurance mandate. The study investigated the effect of the HEQC's institutional audits on teaching and learning at three South African universities. A case study design was used for the investigation. A total of 58 participants spread across the three selected universities were interviewed in 27 interview sessions.

The findings indicate that the audits have had a positive, albeit limited and variable, effect on teaching and learning, and on the support functions for teaching and learning at the three universities. Though there seems to have been considerable progress made in some areas, in other areas the institutions seemed to be struggling to implement their improvement plan effectively and probably need support. Some of the recommendations based on the present study's findings are that the HEQC should put in place more robust follow-up and monitoring mechanisms, including compulsory follow-up site visits, and that institutional audits be conducted at more universities to test the findings of this study.

Keywords: institutional audits, universities, teaching and learning, quality assurance, systems theory, total quality management.

1. Introduction and Brief Background to the Study

Institutional audits constitute one of the ways through which South Africa's Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) executes its quality assurance mandate. The HEQC is a permanent subcommittee of the Council on Higher

Education (CHE) – an independent statutory body which functions as the quality council for higher education in South Africa (CHE 2004). Many countries use institutional audits as a quality assurance mechanism to improve and enhance the quality of the higher education sector (CHE 2004). Since the intended outcome of institutional audits is continuous quality improvement and development, it is essential to determine to what extent the institutional audits have led to quality improvement and enhancement.

Owing to its historical legacy, South Africa has been characterised by disparities on many fronts. On the social front, there are glaring inequalities emanating directly from the apartheid legacy. According to Statistics South Africa's Income and Expenditure Survey 2005/2006 (Statistics South Africa 2008), inequality continues to remain high among the various population groups and within individual population groups. The Gini coefficient¹ based on disposable income (from work and social grants) for the entire country was 0,72 (Statistics South Africa 2008).

Disparities in the education sector, which had been strategically orchestrated by the apartheid government, played a pivotal role in creating further varied forms of social injustice. The apartheid government's University Extension Act of 1959 exacerbated racial discrimination at even the higher education level and had the result that historically black universities became under-privileged institutions in terms of resources (Ilorah 2006). At the same time, under the apartheid government the historically white Afrikaans universities received a disproportionately high percentage of state funding and also had some of the best academic facilities in South Africa (Mabokela & Wei 2007).

In an endeavour to transform South African higher education, the CHE was established in May 1998 in terms of the Higher Education Act, 1997 (Higher Education Act No. 101 of 1997). The CHE discharges its quality assurance functions through its permanent subcommittee, the HEQC.

¹ The Gini coefficient, invented by the Italian statistician Corrado Gini, is a number between zero and one that measures the degree of inequality in the distribution of income in a given society. The coefficient would register zero (0.0 = minimum inequality) for a society in which each member received exactly the same income and it would register a coefficient of one (1.0 = maximum inequality) if one member had all the income and the rest had nothing.

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The HEQC was mandated to conduct institutional audits on the country's higher education institutions in the context of continuing reform and restructuring, with the goal of producing a transformed higher education system of high quality, able to address the complex knowledge and development needs of South African society.

The HEQC's institutional audits ran from 2004 to 2011. The audits focused on institutional policies, systems, procedures, strategies and resources for managing three core functions, namely teaching and learning, research, and community engagement, as well as academic support services (CHE 2007). The HEQC established a set of criteria for the conduct of institutional audits after consultation with higher education institutions (CHE 2007). According to the HEQC criteria for institutional audits (CHE 2004), the following two broad areas were the focus of evaluation in the audits:

- Area 1: Mission of the institution, links between planning, resource allocation and quality management.
- Area 2: Teaching and learning, research and community engagement.

In line with standard international practice, the HEQC uses an audit methodology consisting of institutional self-evaluation, followed by an external validation process by an audit panel of experts and peers appointed by the HEQC. After conducting a self-evaluation, institutions are required to develop an audit portfolio, comprising a self-evaluation report (SER) and supporting documentation. The SER as well as supporting evidence is used to assess the institution's effectiveness and the efficiency of its core academic activities against the HEQC's audit criteria and any other relevant indicators or criteria that the institution has set for itself, such as its mission and vision (CHE 2007).

The members of the audit panel then attend a portfolio meeting with HEQC staff to discuss the SER submitted and to plan the site visit (CHE 2007). After the portfolio meeting, the audit subpanel visits the campus of the institution being audited. The purpose of the campus visit is to inspect the infrastructure that supports teaching and learning. The audit subpanel does not conduct interviews during the campus visits but while on site asks various members of the university community questions to gain clarity. The university management and student leadership are in turn afforded an

opportunity to make presentations to the subpanel about the infrastructure that supports teaching and learning.

Then a report based on the campus visit is shared with all members of the audit panel during the audit visit at the audited institution. The panel validates the institution's claims in the SER during the audit visit by checking the on-site evidence made available by the institution in a dedicated area at the institution's premises (CHE 2007). The main focus of the audit visits is on the interviews the panel conducts with a wide range of the institution's stakeholders, including senior management, academics, academic support staff, students, industry partners, employers and alumni (CHE 2007).

The panel makes an independent judgement about the effectiveness of the institution's internal quality arrangements, which judgement forms the basis for oral feedback and the audit report. The oral feedback, which is presented to the institution on the last day of the audit visit, is the audit panel's account of its preliminary findings (CHE 2007). It is presented at the end of the audit visit at a meeting with the vice-chancellor and senior leadership of the institution, and other staff members invited by the vice-chancellor (CHE 2007).

After the audit visit, the HEQC produces an audit report with commendations and recommendations for the audited institutions, subsequent to which an executive summary of the report is published on the Council on Higher Education's website. Afterwards the HEQC embarks on the post-audit processes, which consist of the submission of the improvement plan by institutions, making visits after the implementation of the improvement plan (if necessary), the submission of the progress report by the institution and the closure of the audit.

In 2011, when the institutional audits of the remaining two public higher education institutions had been completed, the focus shifted to the follow-up processes to ensure that the audited institutions compiled improvement plans in response to the recommendations made in the institutional reports and the subsequent progress reports.

After the cycle of institutional audits had been completed in 2011, the HEQC progressed to the next phase, referred to as the Quality Enhancement Project (QEP). The QEP is a follow up to the institutional audit process conducted by the HEQC. It is a five-year project which focuses on the improvement of teaching and learning in public as well as private higher education institutions, and is carried out in parallel processes (CHE 2015).

The institutional audits revealed that much work was needed to improve the quality of teaching and learning, given the context of a predominantly undergraduate higher education system with consistently poor throughput rates (CHE 2015). In addition, an external evaluation of the HEQC in 2008 had recommended that more attention ought to be given to the enhancement aspect of external quality assurance in the suite of programmes it offered (HEQC 2009).

2. Problem Statement and Focus of the Study

Although the HEQC monitored the progress made with the implementation of the quality improvement plan by analysing the mid-cycle progress report from the higher education institution, usually three years after the audit visit, the process was primarily paper-based and, apart from a few exceptional cases of concern, institutions are not subjected to follow-up visits to verify said the claims made in the progress report (CHE 2004). In addition, the HEQC's monitoring mechanisms focus on engagements with the institutions' senior management members. Furthermore, few studies have been done since the conclusion of the institutional audits in 2011 that sought to establish the effect or consequences of institutional audits on South African universities.

The studies that have been done about the institutional audits in South Africa have focused primarily on the audit process. This study therefore attempts to fill this void as it seeks to establish the influence of HEQC's institutional audits on teaching and learning at higher education institutions by seeking the opinions of academics, students and senior management members at selected universities in South Africa.

The primary aim of this study was to investigate the influence of the HEQC's institutional audits on teaching and learning at three South African universities. To this end, the research questions were categorised into the main research question and subordinate research questions. The general main research question and the more specific subordinate questions helped to narrow down the focus of this research (Punch 2009).

a) The main research question

- How have the HEQC's institutional audits influenced teaching and

learning and their support functions at three South African universities?

b) Subordinate questions

- What discernible effect has the HEQC institutional audits had on teaching and learning policies, practices and behaviours?
- How have the HEQC institutional audits affected the support functions for teaching and learning?

As mentioned above, this study is based mainly on the two broad areas forming the focus of the evaluation in the institutional audits; it does not cover all the aspects of each area. The study specifically covers the following themes: postgraduate supervision, the assessment of students, the institution's vision and mission, resource allocation, and support for black and female academics.

3. Quality Assurance in Higher Education

The processes used in external quality assurance include self-evaluations or reviews, the audit visit, and the post-audit follow-up processes. A self-evaluation affords organisations an opportunity to review the status quo of their processes and performance levels (Brits 2005). The self-evaluation activities preceding the actual site visits and reviews are often seen as having a greater impact than the external review itself (Stensaker *et al.* 2011). Indeed, a study on the impact of quality assurance based on the discussion among representatives of external quality assurance agencies found that there tended to be general agreement that the self-evaluation report was the main benefit of external quality assurance processes (Harvey 2006).

Various studies show that the effects of quality assurance on teaching and learning policies, practices and behaviours in higher education have been largely positive. In the study of Stensaker *et al.* (2011), senior management, academics and students were generally positive about the effects of external quality assurance on the resources and facilities for research. In addition, Stensaker (2003) points out that earlier studies from the Netherlands found there were positive effects of external quality assurance processes on teaching

and learning at higher education institutions. Other studies found that the tendency for external quality assurance to focus its lens mainly on teaching had, to some extent, redressed the historical imbalance between teaching and research, which had been created by the greater value placed on research by higher education's prestige economy than to teaching, particularly at traditional universities (Ewell 2010). Ewell's (2010) observation is corroborated by Minelli *et al.* (2006) and Mohrman (2011) who found that quality assurance interventions led, *inter alia*, to more transparent processes; improved professional practices such as more effective teaching methodologies; the enhancement of the decision-making process in teaching departments; more attention being given to undergraduate education; and an improvement in the allocation of higher education institutions' resources.

The study by Minelli *et al.* (2006) further corroborates the positive effects of external quality assurance on support functions, which investigated the effect of external quality assurance on Italian and Dutch universities. The findings of the study included the increased transparency of processes; reinforcing the universities' overall transformation; and significantly influencing resource development, particularly in the process of financial and human resource allocation (Minelli *et al.* 2006).

In spite of the aforementioned positive effects of quality assurance on higher education, it is important to acknowledge that the relevant stakeholders have not always perceived such higher education quality assurance favourably. In a study by Worthington and Hodgson (2005), academics resented the time they spent on producing documentation for quality assurance and considered it a waste of time. These authors' research also points to a dichotomy between the way academics perform when under the scrutiny of the quality assurance officials during quality audits and what they actually do in practice once they are no longer under this scrutiny (Worthington & Hodgson 2005).

These findings are corroborated by Anderson (2006) whose study on academics' responses to quality in some Australian universities revealed that academics hated the amount of time they spent on quality assurance mechanisms. In fact, Australian academics' ambivalence towards quality assurance, which was initially identified in the early 1990s, appears to be undiminished by the passage of time (Anderson 2006).

This ambivalence could be due to some academics' feelings of fear that the audit was a fault-finding exercise and their perception that

institutional audits were a symbol that they were not trusted (Cheng 2009). In this regard, Billing (2004) observes that university staff members tend to act in a more mature manner if they are treated as responsible adults instead of as mischievous children; they then voluntarily take charge of evaluation and self-control.

Some academics from the UK's higher education institutions felt that the quality assurance system, which focused on a greater need for documentation and box-ticking, was too bureaucratic and only addressed quality at a superficial level (Hoecht 2006). The academics commented that this superficial approach to quality assurance was at the expense of more direct quality-enhancing activities such as teaching preparation. This revelation is consonant with a study by Jones and De Saram (2005) who found that academic staff in Hong Kong felt that quality assurance processes diverted their efforts to marginal administrative requirements instead of allowing and encouraging academics to focus on the authentic, core elements of quality improvement.

Quality assurance agencies have been subjected to scathing criticism and some have even faced closure. Some of the reasons for the criticism are related to the perceived failure of higher education quality assurance mechanisms to address graduate unemployment adequately, inspire public trust in universities, and ensure the optimisation of returns on government investment. The Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA), which was established in 2001, was shut down in 2011. The agency was criticised for focusing primarily on process instead of improving the academic standards (Matchett 2011). In fact, some even barely stopped short of regarding AUQA's work as a waste of time (Matchett 2011).

In 2012, an ENQA review panel found that the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education (HSV) had failed to meet the requirements of the regulations of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) (Myklebust 2012). The panel found that Sweden's quality assurance system was not in compliance with the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (Myklebust 2012). Furthermore, the panel stated that though the end result of a basic principle of ESG should be quality enhancement, the Swedish system made no recommendations on improvement (Myklebust 2012). It was also observed that the Swedish quality assurance system did not always take cognisance of institutions' arrangements for internal quality assu-

rance (Myklebust 2012).

In 2014, the future of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) was threatened after the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) announced that it would invite external bodies to bid for the work undertaken by the QAA (Grove 2014). The HEFCE stated that the move was necessitated by a need to develop innovative approaches to quality assurance which should be risk-based, proportionate, affordable, a low burden and responsive to rapid change in higher education (Grove 2014). Some critics felt that the QAA's institutional reviews for many universities had become virtually ceremonial and that there had to be a greater focus on improving standards and measuring graduate outcomes (Grove 2014).

4. Conceptual Framework

The HEQC's institutional audits covered various themes pertaining to teaching and learning, and also the support areas for teaching and learning. However, in the present study, themes were identified in the criteria of the HEQC's institutional audits, from the analysis of the HEQC audit report summaries and from the findings of the literature review. The themes were subsequently categorised into teaching and learning areas and the support areas for teaching and learning.

Although the HEQC's institutional audits covered many groups of role players at different levels and in both the academic and support sections, the present study focused on three groups of role players. The interviews held with these role players were based on the identified themes and sought their experiences with and opinions about various aspects of teaching and learning and the support areas for teaching and learning (see Figure 1).

It was envisaged that feedback from the three groups of role players would shed light on the possible effects that institutional audits had on teaching and learning, and on the support areas for teaching and learning at South African universities. A review of the literature shows that although institutional audits have had positive as well as negative effects, the overall effect has been positive (Hoecht 2006).

This study is underpinned by Total Quality Management (TQM) and systems theory. Figure 1 shows that the TQM concepts should be embedded in the higher education system and guide approaches and processes so as to increase the likelihood of positive effects from the audits.

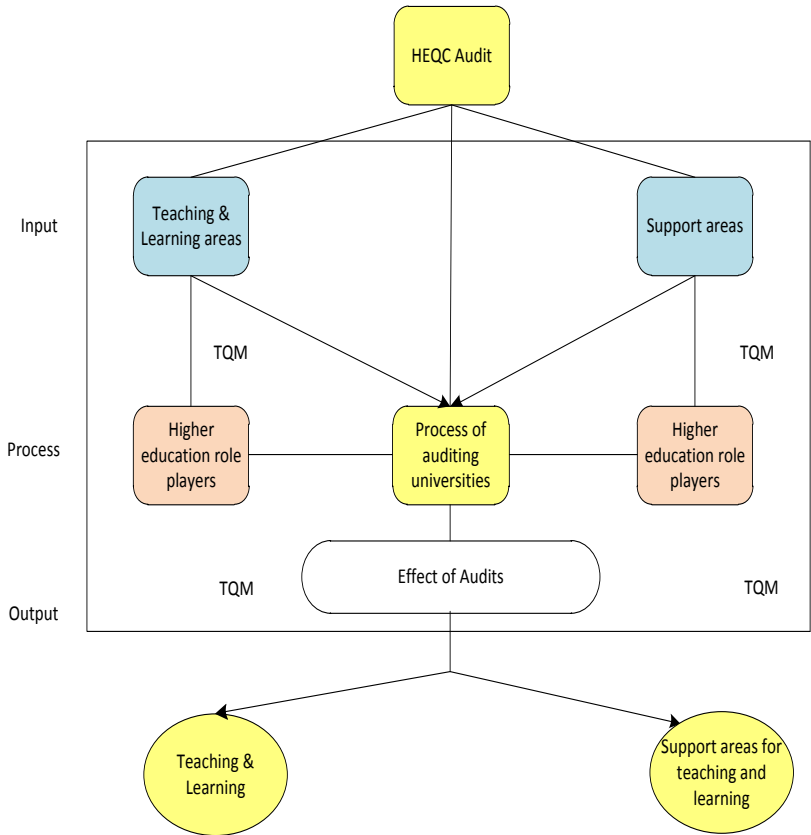


Fig. 1 Conceptual framework of the role of institutional audits in improving quality in higher education (source: Matsebatlela 2015)

TQM’s basic concepts consist of a committed and involved management; a focus on the customer, both internally and externally; the involvement of the entire workforce; continuous process improvement; treating suppliers as partners; and establishing performance measures for the processes (Besterfield 2004). By contrast, systems theory is premised on a holistic approach, where the focus is on the way subsystems interrelate and how systems work over time and in the context of larger systems (Miller-Williams & Kritsonis 2010). As indicated in Figure 1, higher education institutions should be seen as one system with interrelated subsystems. The different role

players at various levels should comply with the institutional audit processes and work in a synergistic manner in order to produce the envisaged outcomes.

In line with the systems approach to quality assurance, different stakeholders at each institutional level must accept and implement a culture of quality and self-evaluation (Fourie 2000), and work synergistically to produce the envisaged outcomes. There is a connection between the conceptual framework of this study and the HEQC's notion of quality in teaching and learning and in support functions. The notion of customer satisfaction is derived from TQM and resonates with the notions of quality that were identified by the HEQC, such as value for money and transformation (Fourie 2000). In the context of the systems approach to quality management, continuous improvement, value-adding and transformation should occur at different levels and in different areas of an institution (Fourie 2000).

5. Research Methodology

This study investigates the influence of the HEQC's institutional audits on South African public higher education institutions. A case study design was used for the investigation to ensure that focused attention would be given to each of the three selected institutions. A case study was the most appropriate research design to help the researcher to answer the research question, as this design involves a systematic and in-depth investigation of a particular phenomenon and the use of multiple sources of evidence with data converging in a triangulating fashion (Yin 2009; Rule & John 2011).

The population comprised all the South African public higher education institutions that had been audited during the HEQC's institutional audits. The sample consisted of three selected public higher education institutions: a traditional university, a comprehensive university and a university of technology. These are referred to as University A, University B and University C respectively. A total of 58 respondents were selected, comprising 12 senior management members, 12 academics and 34 students, spread across these three South African public higher education institutions. The sample also covered rural-based and urban-based universities as well as historically advantaged and disadvantaged institutions. The three universities

are located in two provinces in South Africa. The extent of the diversity among the three universities resulted in information-rich cases that provided an opportunity for maximum variation sampling (Patton 2002). The logic of maximum variation sampling is that when a researcher selects a highly diverse sample, the collection and analysis of data will produce detailed and high-quality descriptions of each of the cases in the sample (Patton 2002). The value of variation-of-sample contexts is corroborated by Botha, Favish and Stephenson (2008) whose study on the comparison of the institutional audit experiences of three South African universities (the University of Cape Town, Stellenbosch University and Rhodes University) found that the different institutional contexts influenced the way in which each of the three universities responded to the institutional audit.

The choice of sample was also based on distance, owing to budgetary and time constraints because the researcher conducted all the interviews personally. As Neuman (2003) notes, one of the main disadvantages of face-to-face interviews is their high cost. Ultimately, three of the initial six universities requested to be part of this study, were selected on the basis of their relatively quick and positive responses.

Table 1, shows the sampling of participants at each of the three selected universities.

Table 1: Sampling of participants per university

Participants	University A	University B	University C
Senior management	Deputy Registrar	Registrar	Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Academic
	Director of Quality Assurance	Director of Quality Assurance (joined by a Quality Assurance Manager)	Director of Quality Assurance (joined by a Quality Assurance Manager)
	Executive Dean	Executive Director of Staff Development	Executive Dean: Faculty of Humanities
	Director of School	Director of Student Administration	Executive Dean: Faculty of Science

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Academics	4 Academics: Faculty of Science and Agriculture	2 Academics: Faculty of Management Sciences 2 Academics: Faculty of Humanities	4 academics: Faculty of Science
Students	6 Undergraduate 4 Postgraduate From Faculty of Science, Faculty of Management Sciences, and Faculty of Humanities	7 Undergraduate 5 Postgraduate From Faculty of Science, Faculty of Management Sciences	9 Undergraduate 3 Postgraduate From Faculty of Science, Faculty of Management Sciences, and Faculty of Humanities

(Source: Matsebatlela 2015)

The necessary adjustments had to be made to the original sample of participants. For example, with regard to senior management staff, the original intention had been to interview a registrar at each of the three universities. However, due to unforeseen challenges, only the registrar at University B was interviewed. At University A, only the deputy registrar was available for the interview, and University C's registrar was not available. The predetermined number of participants and categories remained unchanged in spite of the replacement of some participants.

Furthermore, as regards the spread of participants, the initial intention was to interview academics in similar faculties across all three of the universities. Interviewing across institutions proved impractical owing to the responses from academics who were approached to participate in this study and the difficulties encountered in setting up some interview meetings, so this idea was not pursued. The students were from the faculties of science, management sciences and the humanities (see Table 1). As the sample of participants was not representative of all the faculties at each institution, the participants' views should be read with circumspection regarding generalisations.

Qualitative research uses generalisation to a limited extent, since the intent of this research method is not to generalise findings to individuals, sites or places other than those under study (Creswell 2014). Yin (2009)

distinguishes between two types of generalisation: statistical and analytical generalisation. Statistical generalisation typically applies to survey research whereas analytical generalisation applies to case studies. Concomitantly, in this study, the notion analytical generalisation is deployed.

One of the criticisms of case studies is that they provide little basis for scientific generalisation (Yin 2009). In response, Yin (2009) submits that, like experiments, case studies can be generalised to theoretical propositions but not to populations or universes. In essence, case studies, similarly to experiments, do not represent a 'sample', and a researcher's goal in conducting a case study will be to expand and generalise theories (analytic generalisation), not to enumerate frequencies (statistical generalisation) (Yin 2009).

5.1 Data Collection

The data were collected over eight months in 2012 and 2013. Interviews were held with a total of 12 senior management members and 12 academics, spread across the three identified South African public higher education institutions. Focus groups were conducted with a group of 10 to 12 students at each of the three universities. A sound-recording device was used for recording a verbatim account of the interviews for the purposes of transcription and analysis.

5.2 Data Analysis

This study is comprised of data obtained from 27 interviews. After conducting the interviews, data from the digital recorder were transcribed. Atlas.ti, a data-analysis software package for qualitative data, was used for analysing the data from the interviews. The researcher used Atlas.ti to code the data, write memoranda, and create code families and networks to display the data from the transcriptions. Data were further categorised into themes. In addition, content analysis was used to analyse information thematically which was contained in the executive summaries of the audit reports published on the CHE website.

5.3 Research Ethics

Before conducting the interviews, ethical clearance for this study was sought and obtained from the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria.

Formal permission was also obtained from the relevant management structures and participants at the three institutions to conduct interviews. All participants were informed of the anonymity and confidentiality of their participation.

6. Findings

This section presents a summary of the main research findings. This section is structured according to the subordinate questions of the research.

What discernible effect has the HEQC institutional audits had on teaching and learning policies, practices and behaviours?

- *Postgraduate supervision*

Of the 22 public higher education institutions that had been subjected to institutional audits, 21 received recommendations pertaining to supervision or postgraduate education. The recommendations made to the three universities central to this study in the area of postgraduate education covered the following issues: supervisors acting as examiners of their own students, high workload for supervisors, lack of supervision capacity, delays in the proposal approval process, inadequately qualified supervisors, and using the same external examiners for too long without variation. The prevalence of some of these challenges is corroborated by Singh (2011) who found that universities were grappling with a lack of critical mass in terms of suitably qualified and experienced supervisors, and an increase in the workloads of supervisors.

Feedback from senior managers, academics and students revealed that University A, University B and University C faced various challenges regarding postgraduate education. These challenges included supervision capacity, lack of grievance procedures for postgraduate students, delays in the process of approving proposals and supervisors having to perform the role of examiners of their own students. It became clear during interviews with senior managers, academics and students that, of all the aforementioned challenges in postgraduate education, supervisory capacity posed the greatest challenge at the three universities. This finding is corroborated by the PhD study conducted by the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) in (2010) which found that the percentage of permanent academic staff with PhDs at South African universities ranged from five per cent to 61 per cent

per university. The study furthermore points out that in 2007 the top nine South African public higher education institutions were responsible for producing 83% of the PhD graduates in the South African public higher education sector (ASSAf 2010). The ASSAf report states that the three universities in this study are positioned in the bottom eight universities as regards permanent academic staff with doctoral qualifications. Consequently, it is not surprising that University A, University B and University C face challenges with postgraduate supervision capacity. What is surprising however, are the varying degrees of commitment and urgency with which this issue is being addressed at the three universities. As mentioned above, at one of the three universities (University A) the problem was so dire that some schools did not offer any postgraduate qualifications beyond the honours degree level, because of the lack of sufficiently qualified academics to supervise master's and doctoral students. During the interviews at University A, some students even stated that inadequately qualified lecturers were allowed to supervise students.

The interviewed academics at the three universities stated that the lack of postgraduate supervisors had resulted in heavy workloads for the academics who were qualified to supervise research. The problem was further compounded by the apparent lack of policy on workloads for supervisors. In spite of the challenges that the three universities encountered as regards postgraduate education, it was evident during the interviews that mechanisms were being put in place to address the issues raised. In an attempt to address the lack of supervision capacity, some universities have collaborated with other universities to share supervision capacity and agreed with the other universities that their experienced supervisors would be allowed to mentor their emerging researchers, placed their lecturers in the master's and doctoral qualification programmes of their partner universities, and established supervision forums where meetings have taken place, allowing some interaction between experienced and novice supervisors.

- *Assessment of Students*

Eighteen of the 22 universities that had been audited received recommendations regarding assessment and the security of tests and examinations, including all three of the universities under study. The three universities received recommendations which primarily focused on the

consistent implementation of assessment policy across the university, the practice of using past examination questions in test and examination papers, the integrity and security of student records, and the provision of timely feedback on assessments.

It is evident that the three universities face various challenges pertaining to the assessment of students. The major challenge at the three institutions is the inconsistent application of the university-wide assessment policy. Feedback from participants suggests that this was due to the ineffective communication of the assessment policy; some of the academics were not even aware of their university's assessment policy. In fact, the assessment policy appears to be consistently implemented in some faculties, schools and departments, instead of across the university because academics appear to be more aware of their faculties' assessment policies than of the overarching institutional policy.

Another challenge at the three universities was the practice of repeating examination questions. The problem was so serious that in some cases the cutting and pasting of questions from previous examination papers was glaringly obvious. Whole papers were being repeated. The repetition of examination questions could affect students' learning process. In fact, Struyven, Dochy and Janssens (2005) contend that students' perception of assessment tends to influence their approach to learning; these approaches can be either positive or negative. When students perceive that assessments are inappropriate, this tends to encourage surface learning approaches (Struyven *et al.* 2005). Accordingly, the repetition of previous question papers by academics at University A, University B and University C could adversely affect the learning process by encouraging superficial learning approaches. In fact, it is easier to induce surface-learning approaches than to promote the desirable deep-learning approaches (Struyven *et al.* 2005). The assessment practices of some academics at University A, University B and University C suggest that if the universities do not give adequate attention to the area of assessment, there could be a gradual move towards surface learning in at least some sections of these universities.

Academics play a key role in students' learning approach; but the findings in a study by Struyven *et al.* (2005) suggest that academics are not successful in providing adequate guidance to students about optimum approaches to learning.

Interviews with the academic participants also revealed that University A and University C had serious challenges with the leaking of examination papers. These participants also stated that even though some question papers had reportedly been leaked, they continued to be written or marked regardless. Although it is encouraging to note that some universities in this study acknowledged the challenges they faced with assessment and were making efforts to overcome them, it is still cause for great concern that these assessment practices were allowed to occur and to degenerate to this extent. This is even more telling because assessment defines the higher education curriculum in students' eyes, exerts a profound influence on their learning and has long been perceived as the driving factor for improving teaching and learning (Beaumont, O'Doherty & Shannon 2011).

How have the HEQC institutional audits affected the support functions for teaching?

- *The Crafting and Communication of the Vision and Mission*

All three of the universities received recommendations in their audit reports, pertaining to their visions and missions. The recommendations urged the universities to conduct university-wide debates when reviewing the meaning and appropriateness of their visions and missions, and to communicate these effectively. The responses from the interviews at the three Universities about the vision and mission showed that, in the main, senior managers felt that the process of crafting the universities' strategic directions was widely inclusive of and well communicated to all stakeholders. By contrast, the responses from the academic participants showed general dissatisfaction with the process of crafting and communicating the vision and mission. Some academics thought their senior management had unilaterally decided on the university's vision and mission, whereas others only became aware of their university's vision and mission via the internet. The general view among the students who were interviewed was that they did not know about the mission and vision and felt these had not been communicated to them. The widely divergent perceptions about the universities' visions and missions among senior management on the one hand and staff and students on the other, suggest a marked disjuncture between the former's processes and the latter's expectations and need for communication.

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Although at some universities the members of senior management pointed out the measures that were being taken to improve and monitor the effectiveness of communicating the vision and mission, these efforts appeared to be piecemeal and insufficient.

- *Resource Allocation*

Thirteen of the 22 South African universities received recommendations about resource allocation in the HEQC institutional audit reports. University A, University B and University C had all been given recommendations about resource allocation. The main recommendations made to the three universities in the present study, pertained to the equitable allocation of resources between the main and satellite campuses and the resourcing of libraries.

There was general concurrence among senior management members at the three universities that the satellite campuses, including their libraries, were not as adequately resourced as the libraries at the main campuses. However, though senior managers at University B and University C acknowledged that inequitable resource allocation was an unfortunate fact that should be corrected, their counterparts at University A attributed the concerns about inequitable resourcing at satellite campuses to misconception and misunderstanding. The view held by senior managers at University A, who dismissed complaints about inequitable resourcing as a product of misconception, is cause for concern as it may imply that the University is reluctant to address this concern about satellite campuses. It is also worrying that a senior management member at University C expressed pessimism about satellite campuses since this gloomy sentiment could signify inertia regarding conditions at this University's satellite campuses.

The interviewed academics were generally satisfied with the service provided by the libraries at the main campuses, whereas the participating students at the main campuses expressed concern about library space and resources such as computers, including limited internet access. The participating students at the satellite campuses of the three universities generally felt marginalised as they had the impression that the University management gave more attention to the resources at the main campus.

The three universities seemed to have made notable progress with the resourcing of their libraries, although more still ought to be done, particularly

about the equitable resourcing of infrastructure and human resources at the main and satellite campuses. Each of the universities had appointed new incumbents to head their libraries. The feedback from the stakeholders suggested that these new appointees were accomplishing positive changes at the university libraries.

- *Support for Black and Female Academics*

Twelve of the 22 universities that had been audited by the Higher Education Quality Committee had received recommendations pertaining to support for black and female staff members. University A, University B and University C received recommendations focusing on the provision of support for black and women staff members, the elimination of a patriarchal culture and an equitable representation of female academics. The responses from senior management at these three universities were mainly positive about the support given to black and female academics. Senior managers generally had the impression that the universities were providing adequate support to the two groups that had historically been marginalised. They also indicated that the institutions were taking measures to improve the support given to these groups of academics. Conversely, academics generally pointed to a lack of support for black and female academics. At University B, South African black academics stated that they felt marginalised as the University seemed to prefer foreign black academics. At University C, academics had the view that support for female academics was inadequate and that there was a low proportion of female academic staff, particularly in the science and engineering fields.

The recommendation on changing a patriarchal culture at University A has apparently not been given adequate attention. During the interviews for this research, the University's executive management team of 13 members consisted of only one female member and all the deans of faculties were male. As regards support for female academics at University A, the responses from the academics interviewed seem to suggest that the responsibility for supporting female academics was assigned to an association for women researchers, which was aimed at providing support to female staff and to female students engaged in postgraduate research. The association was subsequently formally launched in 2012, suggesting that the University had

made an effort to address the recommendation pertaining to the provision of support for female researchers.

The disparity in the views of senior management and academics regarding the support given to black and female academics suggests that more still has to be done to support black and female academics to ensure that these demographic groups feel as valued as the other historically advantaged demographic groups, such as male and white academics.

7. Conclusions

Overall, the influence of institutional audits on teaching and learning and their support functions at the three universities has been positive but limited and variable. A key function of external quality assurance is to stimulate change and to improve teaching and learning (Stensaker *et al.* 2011). Positive changes in and progress with the various the areas of teaching and learning do seem to have occurred since the HEQC's institutional audits had been conducted at the three institutions. These changes include an improvement in the infrastructure for teaching and learning, the contracting of experienced postgraduate supervisors from other universities to help supervise postgraduate students and mentor novice supervisors, and using technology to enhance the teaching of large classes. There was general concurrence among the three universities that the self-evaluation exercise and institutional audits had added value by making staff members more aware of their strengths and weaknesses, thus enabling them to improve the level of quality in the identified areas. Support structures had also apparently been put in place to support black and female academics at the three universities, although it is evident that more should be done in this area.

However, the three universities appear to have variably addressed the different areas of concern pointed out in the HEQC institutional audit reports. For example, communicating the vision and mission is still a challenge at the three universities. It is evident from the interviewee responses that the crafting of the universities' vision and mission was not sufficiently inclusive and not effectively communicated to members of the universities' communities. Moreover, the three universities seem to address the allocation of resources across the main and satellite campuses variably and inadequately.

Although the three universities have made efforts to address the recommendations made in the HEQC audit reports, it is evident that these universities still have to do more to implement their improvement plans adequately.

8. Recommendations

Instead of the current primarily paper-based practice of assessing the progress that institutions have made with addressing the recommendations in the audit reports, the HEQC should put in place more robust follow-up mechanisms, including compulsory follow-up visits, site visit inspections and follow-up interviews with selected members of the university community at different levels, not only with a university's executive leadership.

In order to overcome the challenges pertaining to the assessment of students by academics, it is recommended that the universities should consider making it compulsory for all academics to have done a course or attended a workshop on assessment in their first year of joining the university, to ensure that they are apprised of the university's assessment policy and practice.

The findings in this study could be validated by conducting similar research at more universities. This could be achieved by applying both qualitative and quantitative approaches to interviewing and distributing the questionnaires to a larger number of universities and participants.

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