The Perception of Academic Staff in Relation to Programme Re-Accreditation in South African Higher Education Institutions

Jacob M. Selesho

ABSTRACT: *The perception held by academic staff of programme re-accreditation has been a major problem in 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 Institutions. To a large extent, academics believe that the role of the government amounts to interference rather than being accountable, and that the academic freedom has been violated. The participants of the study were academics from the 23 South African universities. 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 their own role (academic freedom). 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 the HE. For that matter, academics will create a platform to hide their failure. The article further recommends that the first step in programme re-accreditation should perhaps be in the form of improvement or enhancement of quality.*
KEY WORDS: *Programme re-accreditation and self-evaluation, academic staffs' perception, role of the government, and improvement or enhancement of the Higher Education quality.*

Introduction

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) academics are being challenged by the increasing accountability and the 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 South African 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.

Dr. Jacob M. Selesho is the Head of Postgraduate Studies in Education, Central University of Technology (CUT), Free State, Bloemfontein, Republic of South Africa. He can be reached at: jselesho@cut.ac.za

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.

Accordingly, P. Abbott (2007:15-17) further stated that HEIs must be able to explain to society at large what they are doing and demonstrates how well they perform. Furthermore, institutions are confronted with the need to show their relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, and quality of their teaching. Meanwhile, R. Lewis (2006:11) has been arguing that the concept of accountability has two distinct dimensions: (1) answering to the assigned mission effectively; and (2) 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 South African 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 paper 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 paper 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 to HEI. The paper will also 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.

D. Woodhouse (2006:22-24) 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 (Newton, 2007:14).

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.

Quality is an elusive term, as many people have argued; for example: "*Quality is notoriously elusive of prescription, and no easier even to describe and discuss than deliver in practice*" (Vlãsceanu, Grunberg & Parlea, 2004:20). There are some who suggest that quality, in relation to HE, is too complex to define; however, they still want to measure this indefinable concept. There have been those who imply, or even explicitly state, that quality is something one knows when one sees it or experiences it. This, though, defines quality in terms of an individual's implicit subjective criteria (Vlãsceanu, Grunberg & Parlea, 2004:21).

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, J. Newton (2007:17) defines it as the extent to which goals have been achieved. Meanwhile, A. Kowalkiewicz (2007:63) argues that quality in the context of HEIs is bound up with the values and fundamental aims of HEI. 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. Programme accreditation establishes the academic standing of the programme or the ability of the programme to produce graduates with professional competence to practise and is often referred to as professional accreditation (Harvey, 2004:207-223). The HE Funding Council for England's (HEFCE, 2003) definition focuses on courses (programmers). Accreditation is the approval of an HE course by an authorised body.

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 (M.Ed.) where out of 23 universities' programmes, of which three universities withdrawn from participating in the process. It was report that only 7 universities managed to get full accreditation, while 7 were provisionally accredited and the rest (5) their programme were withdrawn as they were deemed not to meet the minimum standard. This raises many questions with the academic staff of the universities that their M.Ed.

programmes 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 HE is becoming increasingly important to nations right across the world, seeing that these institutions represent some of the valuable resources of their countries. 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.

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 (Stensaker & Harvey, 2004:13). 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 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. D. Woodhouse (2006:22-27) elaborates on the views of R. Lewis (2006:17), 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 R. Lewis, a good internal quality assurance report should reflect on the state of the art of the quality of a particular organisation (Lewis, 2006:18).

If HEI's 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 AND PRINCIPLES OF GOOD PRACTICES

Internal evaluation is a process of quality review undertaken within an institution for its own ends and purposes. From an external agency perspective, an internal review is seen as the part of the external process that an institution undertakes in preparation for an external event, such as a peer-review or a site visit. In such circumstances, an internal review tends to be conflated with self-evaluation (Vlãsceanu, Grunberg & Parlea, 2004:38).

There is a tendency in the literature to equate internal evaluation with self-evaluation. In some contexts they are the same, as internal evaluation is shorthand for the self-evaluation document or process (Abbott, 2007:15-17).

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*" (HEQC, 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 (Vettori, 2007:10-15).

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.

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 (HEQC, 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 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 HEI's 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.

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. 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 from the 23 universities that did participate during the M.Ed. re-accreditation process conducted by the HEQC. Heads of Schools and senior academic were included in order to ascertain which factors influenced the development of self-evaluation.

A total of ninety five academics (n=95) 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 participants did indeed participated in the programme re-accreditation process and they can share their knowledge and skills with the researcher with regard to the tasks. Furthermore, the researcher observed that academics from the surveyed programme (M.Ed.) had an advantage over others, as they had already participated in more than 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. C. Bless, C. Higson-Smith and A. Kagee (2007:71-73) 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: (1) The

role of lecturers in programme accreditations; (2) Their expectations with regard to programme re-accreditations; (3) Their participation in internal self-evaluation; (4) Their experiences in Higher Education; and (5) Evaluation of the site.

In total ninety five copies of the questionnaire were distributed among selected participants. 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 academic participate fully, the covering letter was printed on an official Central University of Technology, Free State letterhead.

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 experiences 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 Assurance Units of the institutions. The purpose of collecting the reports was to test the 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 Assurance 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 if the units evaluated, 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 ninety five academics, who had received questionnaires, only 91 participants responded. Out of the 91 responses, 65 academics had more that 10 years' experience in HE, while the other 26 academics have less than 5 years working experience in HE. Academics felt that this process is very strenuous and it consumes most of their time. Especially for novice lecturers, who at the time of the study had less than 5 years experience, 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, 87 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 91 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 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 their respective institutions. In addition to that, 67 respondents alluded to the fact that they were qualified assessors. Probing further, 78 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 (NPHE). 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 a 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 and Recommendation

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 are 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 the 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 (High Education Quality Committee) 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.

References

Abbott, P. (2007). *QA and Enhancement in Small State: The Case of Rwanda*. Paris: UNESCO [UnitedNations for Education, Social and Cultural Organization].

Bless, C., C. Higson-Smith & A. Kagee. (2007). *Fundamental of Social Research Methods: An African Perspective.* Cape Town: Juta and Company, fourth edition.

Education White Paper 3. (1997). *A Programme for the Transformation of HE [High Education].* Pretoria: Department of Education.

Harvey, L. (2004). "The Power of Accreditation: Views of Academics" in *Journal of HE Policy and Management,* 26(2), pp.207–223.

Harvey, L. & J. Newton. (2005). "Transforming Quality Evaluation in HE" in *Quality in HE*, 10(2), pp.77-91.

HEFCE [High Education Funding Council for England]. (2003). *Further Development of the Method for the Assessment of the Quality of Education.* London, UK: 2/3 [June].

High Education Act 101 of 1997. Cape Town, South Africa: Department of Education, 1997.

HEQC [High Education Quality Committee]. (2003). *Communiqué to HE Institution and Other Stakeholders.* Pretoria: Council for HE.

HEQC [High Education Quality Committee]. (2004a). *Framework for Institutional Audits.* Pretoria: Council for HE.

HEQC [High Education Quality Committee]. (2004b). *Communiqué on Plans and Activities for 2004.* Pretoria: Council for HE.

Kowalkiewicz, A. (2007). "The Impact of Quality Culture on Quality Teaching: A Case of Business HE in Poland, Embedding Quality Culture in HE". *A Selection of Papers* from the 1st European Forum for QA [Quality Assurace], Technische Universitat Munchen, Germany.

Kristoffersen, D. (2003). *Denmark in Educational Evaluation around the World: An International Anthology.* Copenhagen: The Danish Evaluation Institute, ISBN 877958-132-3.

Lewis, R. (2006). *Guidelines of Good Practice: International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in HE.* Pretoria: Council for HE.

NCHE [National Commission on High Education]. (1996). *A Framework for Transformation.* Pretoria: HRSC.

NPHE [National Plan for High Education]. (2001). Pretoria: Department of Education.

Newton, J. (2007). "What is Quality? Embedding Quality Culture in HE". *A Selection of Papers* from the 1st European Forum for QA [Quality Assurance], Technische Universitat Munchen, Germany.

Republic of South Africa. (1995). *South African Qualification Authority Act (Act 58 of 1995).* Pretoria: Government Printer.

Stensaker, B. & L. Harvey. (2004). "New Wine in Old Bottles or Was it the Other Way Around? A Comparison of Public and Private Accreditation Schemes in HE". *Paper* at the CHER Conference, Enschede, 17–19 September.

Stensaker, B. (2007). "Impact of Quality Processes: Embedding Quality Culture in HE". *A Selection of Papers* from the 1st European Forum for QA [Quality Assurance], Technische Universitat Munchen, Germany.

Schwarz, S. & D.F. Westerheijden. (2004). *Accreditation and Evaluation in the European HE Area.* Dorndrecht: Kluwer Academic Publisher.

Vettori, O. (2007). "Dealing with Ambivalences-Strategic Option for Nurturing a Quality Culture in Teaching and Learning: Embedding Quality Culture in HE". *A Selection of Papers* from the 1st European Forum for QA [Quality Assurance], Technische Universitat Munchen, Germany.

Vlãsceanu, L., L. Grünberg & D. Pârlea. (2004). *QA and Accreditation: A Glossary of Basic Terms and Definitions.* Bucharest: UNESCO-CEPES Papers on HE, ISBN 92-9069-178-6.

Woodhouse, D. (2006). "The Role of QA Agencies in High Education in the 21st Century". *Keynote Paper* to 1st International Conference on Assessing Quality in High Education, Lahore, 11-13 December.