

## **Capitulation and Compliance or Creative Detachment? Examining Quality Promotion at the University of Natal in the Light of the New External Quality Assurance Regime**

Ms Denyse Webbstock<sup>a</sup> and Dr Jennifer Weir<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*Director, Quality Promotion Unit, University of Natal, Durban, 4041, South Africa*

<sup>b</sup>*Quality Advisor, Academic Programs, Centre for Higher Education Quality, Monash University, Melbourne, Vic 3800 (formerly of the Quality Promotion Unit, University of Natal, South Africa)*

*This paper explores the implications of the South African Higher Education Quality Committee's shift of emphasis of quality as 'fitness of, and for purpose', and 'transformation' to 'conformance to specifications' as in Harvey and Green's classification. This change of focus contrasts with the approach of the University of Natal as promoting, developing and implementing quality initiatives, guided by a philosophy of partnership development. The new external quality assurance environment will have significant implications for quality activities at institutions in South Africa. It could be seen to run counter to the long-term efforts of the Quality Promotion Unit at the University of Natal, and policies and procedures put in place to encourage organisational change and quality improvement in areas such as student feedback, promotions for academic staff, academic staff development, and student assessment. We believe it is essential to include both accountability and improvement aspects of quality to encourage a culture of continuous improvement rather than a culture of compliance. The key question for the Unit is whether we alter our strategies to accommodate a compliance philosophy, and in the process alienate our partners within the institution, or do we wait for the first audit?*

The Council on Higher Education in South Africa established the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC), which has responsibility for quality matters in universities, technikons and agricultural colleges. Its brief is to promote quality, audit higher education (HE) institutions *and* accredit programmes in HE (see <http://www.che.org.za/heqc/heqc.php>). The HEQC has developed a quality framework that it argues is based on an understanding of quality as fitness of, and for purpose, value for money, and transformation. This is very much in line with the original model and influences behind the development of the framework, which were Australasian for the most part—from New Zealand, in particular. However, while the HEQC *Audit Framework* document produced in 2002 purports to be aiming for quality enhancement, it is focused very strongly on the accountability aspects of quality. Similarly, the recent production of a discussion document on criteria to be used in institutional audits underscores the accountability approach. In that sense it could be argued that the HEQC has shifted from its own key understanding of quality as 'fitness of, and for purpose', and 'transformation' to an understanding of quality as, in Harvey and Green's classification, 'conformance to specifications'.

We argue that the shift has been too radical, and that the current framework and criteria are more reminiscent of the United Kingdom's Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) system and the Indian accreditation system than was originally foreseen, with their different underlying philosophies and emphasis on conforming to set standards. We believe it is essential to include both components of quality, that is, the accountability and improvement aspects, to encourage a culture of continuous improvement rather than a culture of compliance. Unlike the Australian system, the South African HEQC is not only responsible for auditing HE institutions but is also responsible for programme accreditation, and it is this brief which seems to have been the impetus for the shift from pure audit to a model driven largely by accountability imperatives. While in principle we would support the goal of self-accreditation outlined in the HEQC process, which links accreditation and audit, the process will be ineffective unless cognisance is taken of key factors related to enhancing teaching, learning and research in institutions.

In this paper, we explore some of the implications of this shift in underlying understandings of quality in the national quality regime for institutions of HE in South Africa. The University of Natal has, in many ways, been a leader in quality assurance (QA) in South Africa and has taken what we consider to be a balanced approach of QA and enhancement. It could be argued that the progress made by the institution's Quality Promotion Unit (QPU) in promoting, developing and implementing quality initiatives in the University is largely due to the quality enhancement approach taken, guided by a philosophy of partnership development. However, the new external QA environment runs the risk of creating a culture of compliance. This will have significant implications for quality activities at institutions and could be seen to run counter to the long-term efforts of the QPU at the University of Natal, and policies and procedures put in place to encourage organisational change and quality improvement in the University.

The tension between the QPU's philosophy and the emergence of an increasing tendency towards compliance philosophy espoused by the HEQC is manifested in the areas that the QPU has been implementing for some time with a focus on improvement, as well as areas currently under consideration. For example, the University, through the QPU, has invested significant time and resources into enhancing teaching quality only to find that the HEQC will not give either 'in depth' or 'general' scrutiny to this key area of activity. Such areas include academic development in a number of forms including encouraging innovative approaches to teaching and learning within the university responsive to need, the availability of formal qualifications in HE, student feedback, teaching portfolios and an intern and mentoring programme.

The first area we concentrate on in examining this tension is just one of these—the student feedback system. The approach taken in developing this system was one of being helpful to staff for the purpose of improving their teaching. It is thus voluntary, in-depth and non-comparative and, while there are elements of standardisation in the instruments used, these are adapted for context. The system is widely used by staff. In a recent visit to the institution by the HEQC, however, the stress was on making the system compulsory, standardised and, by implication, to be used for quality monitoring purposes rather than for quality improvement.

A second area we explore is promotions policy for academic staff. Performance appraisal in HE is an example of current policy development that seems to set up tension between competing objectives. Performance management systems are often implemented as a quality initiative for the purpose of continuous improvement, but end up being instruments of accountability. The University of Natal has a system of automatic incremental increases in salary for all staff, negotiated each year, plus yearly bonuses for all staff. This is now being criticised from constituencies within the institution as inequitable since outstanding performance is not singled out for reward, nor is poor performance adequately challenged. Rather, the reward has become a given.

In recent years, other mechanisms of reward have been introduced with varying degrees of success including a personal academic promotion system on the basis of performance in four key areas and a merit award system and reviews at individual and school level. In a variety of university-wide forums there has been a call for the introduction of a system of performance appraisal linked to rewards. Yet, performance review mechanisms are often criticised on the basis that they tend to be summative rather than formative, and rarely lead to real improvement. In this sense, performance appraisal is largely ineffective in improving performance and quality in HE. If indeed that is the case, there is little to be gained from taking the same path as other countries and we must explore alternatives. In terms of quality, the key question for us is whether our effort to introduce a performance management or appraisal system at the University of Natal is a forward-looking and viable option in line with our philosophy of continuous improvement, or have we missed the boat given HEQC's culture of compliance?

A third area in which we examine the implications of a developing culture of compliance is academic staff development. In the HEQC audit criteria (while staff development is not a target area for audit in the first round), there is in general a tendency to value the existence of policy over and above the realities of what happens in particular areas. The criteria approach embodies a linear understanding of policy and practice—first there is policy, then there is implementation, and then there is review. However,

universities are living bodies, and most have lived for a very long time, such that many practices are carried out routinely without there necessarily being a single policy document guiding that activity. Staff development, and our fourth area of exploration—student assessment—are cases in point. In terms of the former, at the University of Natal, much staff development happens without it necessarily emanating from one source or one unit or one policy document, but through a whole variety of developmental practices. These might be seminars, both centrally organised and in faculties, quality enhancement projects at the academic coalface, as it were, mentoring projects and individual consultations, and they change according to need. Given the nature of the external criteria, it now appears that energy will need to be diverted into writing up policy after the fact in order to be able to produce it for scrutiny, rather than in improving the practices which exist.

Similarly, with respect to student assessment, which is one of the areas to be examined in the first round of audits, the criteria request an overall policy. Universities have been examining students for years without following one written policy. Rather, they have been negotiating the rules in, for example, faculty rules committees and postgraduate examination committees on a constant basis. To gather together all these decisions made over years and in a variety of forums to inform a policy document again requires diverting energy from the practices. The overarching criteria approach also ignores the fact that universities are uneven institutions in that there is a high level of devolution of responsibility, such that rules are applied and adapted according to context. Essentially, student assessment happens at module level, and should be scrutinised there as part of a module or programme review.

Our paper concludes with some comparisons with other systems of QA and some suggestions to avoid the stranglehold of a bureaucratic culture of compliance developing. The HEQC culture of compliance is evident in the tone and language used in its documents, such as ‘levels of scrutiny’. Note the difference in, for example, the Australian Universities Quality Agency’s (AUQA) *Audit Manual* (2002, p. 47), which says that AUQA audits of institutions ‘pay particular attention’ to:

- program approval and monitoring
- research activities and outputs
- overseas operations, including comparability of standards, on-shore and off-shore
- communication with stakeholders
- systematic internally-initiated reviews (e.g. of departments, themes) including the rigour and effectiveness of the review mechanism employed.

It also states that the audits will refer to institutional documents such as Quality Improvement Plans. This is a vastly different focus than the ambitious scrutiny planned by the HECQ outlined in their 2002 *Framework* document, which gives little direction to universities about how to prepare for audit. At no stage does the HEQC mention any concept of partnership, transparency or process of reflection. Self-evaluation seems to be a non-starter. The HEQC’s 2003 *Audit Criteria* document is fraught with contradiction when, on the one hand, claiming to take institutional mission into account in determining fitness for purpose and, at the same time, implementing Department of Education targets and benchmarks.

Monash University’s approach to quality includes a quality cycle of planning, acting, evaluating and improving based on the action research cycle of continuous improvement. In terms of developing quality, the cycle encourages a process, but does not preclude entering that cycle at any point. *Quality at Monash: Values and Principles* (p. 10) points out that:

An advantage of thinking about quality in terms of a cycle is that there is no ‘right’ place to enter. While some may start with planning, others will be preparing for review. Also, having completed a cycle as described, the next phase may be thought of as a spiral, or series of spirals, if other actions are generated out of the first sequence.

Given our concern with HEQC's philosophy of compliance, does the HEQC 'quality cycle' of 'policy development, implementation, evaluation/review and improvement' (2003, p. 10) mean the proliferation of policies and possible erosion of autonomy? This apparent contrast with the principle of the action research cycle as one of continuous improvement is of particular concern as the prescriptive nature of the HEQC cycle suggests the necessity of one step—i.e. development of policy—before quality activities can be implemented.

AUQA's quality framework is based on Approach, Deployment, Results, and Improvement (ADRI). This has been expanded now to:

- Goals/objectives
- Approach
- Deployment/implementation
- Monitoring
- Results/outputs/outcomes/evidence
- Interpretation, related to objectives in the mission and plans
- Improvement actions
- Organisational learning

(Reproduced from [http://www.auqa.edu.au/qualityaudit/auditmanual\\_v1/chapter19/index.shtml](http://www.auqa.edu.au/qualityaudit/auditmanual_v1/chapter19/index.shtml), retrieved March 27, 2003.)

A key factor in this expanded approach is organisational learning. At no point does the HEQC seem to consider the important aspect of the university as a learning organisation and relate this to QA.

Where does the University of Natal's QPU go from here with the ever-tightening tension that has emerged from the HEQC's compliance philosophy described as quality improvement? Do we abandon our philosophy and alter our strategies to accommodate a compliance philosophy and in the process alienate our partners within the institution, or do we 'stick to our guns' and wait for the first audit?

## References

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