

# **QUALITY ASSURANCE IN SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION AND ITS IMPLEMENTATION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF DURBAN-WESTVILLE**

## **CHAPTER 1 PROBLEM FORMULATION, AIMS AND METHODOLOGY**

### **1.1 INTRODUCTION**

This chapter provides a brief introductory overview of the critical and theoretical debates regarding quality assurance in higher education. The chapter further provides an outline of the study's thematic focus and describes its theoretical and methodological approaches. The chapter concludes with a brief account of the limitations of this investigation.

### **1.2 QUALITY ASSURANCE: A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE**

As higher education systems all over the world strive to become more accountable to the people they serve and to the governments which provide them with funding, the issue of quality assurance – a notion borrowed from the private sector – has become increasingly important as one of the main challenges facing managers of higher education institutions. In a critical overview of international policies and procedures regarding quality assurance Harman (1998:346), an Australian educationist, comments as follows on this trend:

Wherever you go, managers of higher education systems and institutions today are concerned about quality and how to put in

place appropriate quality assurance mechanisms, while ministers, bureaucrats, employees and business interests are all increasingly concerned about the outputs of higher education institutions and the suitability of graduates to meet workplace needs.

As Woodhouse (1996 : 355) explains, there are various and sometimes self-contradictory reasons for the current preoccupation with quality in higher education. Woodhouse further points out that this worldwide preoccupation with quality in higher education is a response to external demands for accountability and a form of acknowledgement by institutions of higher learning of the need for continuous organizational improvement and innovation.

### 1.3 QUALITY ASSURANCE IN SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

In the South African context, the *National Plan for Higher Education* (Asmal, 2001: 36) foregrounds the interconnections between quality, equity and redress:

The focus on efficiency improvements cannot and must not be at the expense of academic outputs. The principle of quality, ... , must underpin any efficiency strategy. In fact, quality is central to redress and equity. It is unacceptable for graduates in general and those from disadvantaged communities in particular, to be short-changed in terms of the quality of programme provision as it would not only impact on their ability to improve their own life chances, but it would also adversely impact on the broader agenda for social and economic development.

As I hope to show in this study, linking the idea of academic quality to issues of social justice underpinned by development has implications for the model of quality assurance management adopted at both national and institutional levels. The model of quality assurance chosen by higher education institutions in South Africa should, inevitably, reflect the government's position in the global debates regarding the apparently irresolvable conflict between concerns for equity and the need for economic efficiency and global competitiveness. Thus debates about quality assurance should not be seen as merely 'academic' or as being about the re-organisation of the governance of higher education, but should be seen for what they are: ideologically loaded political interventions in higher education.

In spite of their epistemological status as 'scientific', and thus by definition fairly 'objective' knowledge, academic dissertations often reflect the values, interests and preferences of the researcher. In a case study relying on qualitative research methodology such as this one, it is important for the researcher to declare his or her pre-conceived ideas and values up front. Following the example of Denzin & Lincoln (1998:4), I envisage my role as a researcher as that of a *bricoleur* who 'understands that research is an interactive process shaped by his or her personal history, biography, gender, social class, race, ethnicity, and those of the people in the setting. The *bricoleur* knows that science is power, for all research findings have political implications.'

In accordance with this central requirement of qualitative research, I wish to point out from the very onset that the main preconception which guides this study is that national and institutional systems of quality management in higher education should give equal value to the implications of both the concepts of 'assurance' and 'enhancement' in discourses about academic quality. In a country undergoing fundamental socio-economic transformation, it is important

that both quality assurance (monitoring and assessment) and quality enhancement (improvement and promotion) should be given equal attention in policy formulation, implementation and evaluation. Thus the central concerns of this study are implicit in what seems to be a deliberately provocative title of Yorke's (1996) article: 'Shouldn't quality be enhanced rather than assessed?'

#### 1.4 CONCEPTIONS OF QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEMS

In spite of the growing global interest in quality assurance mechanisms, however, the inherently elusive concept of quality within the context of higher education cannot be pinned down to any particular and precise interpretation. Various scholars of higher education management (Lategan, 1999; Van Damme, 2000; Sachs, 1994; Lim, 2001; Harvey & Green, 1993; Lindsay, 1992) have commented on the multiplicity of definitions of quality within the context of higher education. In the words of Lim (2001:14), 'there are as many definitions of it [quality] as there are stakeholders'. Harvey and Green (1993: 11-28) outline five fairly distinct yet overlapping conceptions of quality in higher education: quality as exceptional products or services, quality as perfection or consistency, quality as fitness for purpose, quality as value for money and quality as transformation. It would seem that the various approaches to quality mentioned by Harvey and Green are generally compatible and even interchangeable rather than mutually exclusive. It is not uncommon to find institutions whose organisational culture reflects features normally associated with all the five approaches.

As shown in recent policy documents on quality assurance, policy makers in the field of South African higher education seem to favour the instrumental or the functional conception of quality (Republic of South Africa, 1997a; Department

of Education, 2001; Higher Education Quality Committee, 2002). According to this approach:

Quality is ... judged in terms of the extent to which the product or service fits its purpose. This notion is quite remote from the idea of quality as something special, distinctive, elitist, conferring status or difficult to attain. It is a functional definition of quality rather than an exceptional one. If something does the job it is designed for then it is a quality product or service. (Harvey & Green, 1993: 16-7)

## 1.5 DEFINITION OF TERMS

The central concepts used in this study are largely in line with the definitions provided by Vroeijenstijn (1995: xviii-xix ):

### *Quality assurance*

Quality assurance may be described as systematic, structured and continuous attention to quality in terms of quality maintenance and quality improvement. Continuous quality care is a *sine qua non* for quality assurance. One of the tools in the field of quality care is quality assessment.

### *Quality assessment*

By quality assessment we mean every structured activity which leads to a judgement of the quality of the teaching / learning process and / or research, whether self-assessment or assessment by external experts. There is no real difference between assessment, evaluation and review. Those terms are seen as interchangeable.

### *Quality audit*

Quality audit has a more strict meaning and aims at the process of evaluating the way quality is assured. It is not so much looking for quality, more to a quality assurance mechanism.

The following concepts about the management and governance of higher education institutions also feature prominently in the study and should be given operational definitions:

### *Efficiency*

In terms of the efficiency principle "emphasis is put on cost-cutting, capping budgets and seeking greater transparency in resource allocation through activity- and performance-oriented budgeting." (Bleiklie,I, Hostaker,R & Vabo, A, 2000:188)

### *Corporate enterprise ideology*

"The core of [this] ideology as it manifested itself in the area of higher education is the idea that a university ought to be organized and governed like a corporate enterprise." "The ideology behind the corporate enterprise conception of the university represents principles that stand the traditional public administration ideal on its head. .... Administrative reform based on this ideology aims at enabling public institutions to act in the best possible way as something they are not : private enterprises on the market." (Bleiklie I et al, 2000:185, 187-188).

## 1.6 RECONCILING GLOBAL IMPERATIVES WITH NATIONAL NEEDS

Policy changes and innovations in South African higher education have invariably taken the form of responses to the imperatives of reconstruction and development in the post-1994 political dispensation, globalisation in its various manifestations and to the demands of the postindustrial or postmodern era. Perhaps the most important considerations with regard to policy formulation in a globalising modern economy like South Africa are those of 'economic efficiency' and 'global competitiveness' (Ilon, 1994 ; Lemmer, 1999). Du Gay's (2000: 117) comments about the effects of globalisation on the provision of social services have a particular pertinence to South Africa and are worth quoting at length:

Within the discourse of globalization the pursuit of national economic efficiency is the *sine qua non* of national security and well-being. This incessant hunt for economic efficiency appears as a foundation not only for economic growth but also all those other activities that must be financed from growth. ... Anything that might seem to have a bearing on economic life (and this includes education, defence and health as well as social welfare) is assessed not only in terms of the availability of resources .... national economic efficiency.

Although South African policy makers seem to be aware that they can only ignore the local socio-historical context at their own peril, globalisation in its various manifestations seems to be the driving force behind new education policies including the formation of the *National Qualifications Framework*, the integration of education and training as articulated in *Education White Paper 4*, and a preoccupation with the assurance and assessment of performance as reflected in recent draft policy documents on quality assurance in the higher education sector(HEQC, 2002). The obvious but often undeclared aim of

contemporary education policies both in the South African and in the broader global context seems to be to make the education system as 'cost-effective' and 'efficient' as possible (Lenn,1993:71). As Lenn (1993: 71) puts it, countries all over the world seem to have recognized the connection between educational quality and economic development and growth. Globalisation has also led to the creation international students who study different modules or programmes in different countries. This has prompted many countries to re-evaluate the quality of their academic offerings and to be more open about their activities (Frazer 1994).

One of the challenges facing education policy makers in South Africa is to strike a balance between national socio-economic and transformation issues and the wide-ranging social and economic consequences of globalisation and its underpinning discourse of 'economic efficiency'. Interestingly, *The National Plan for Higher Education* seeks to address 'the learning needs of our citizens and the reconstruction and development needs of our society and economy' on the one hand, and to 'make us significant players on the global stage', on the other hand. (Asmal, 2000: 1-2). One of the questions posed by this study is whether these two laudable aims are compatible. There is a sense in which the obsession with the assessment and monitoring of quality (often defined in operational and quantifiable terms) is directly traceable to the ongoing commodification and marketization of education. These are issues that a study of the policy discourses of quality assurance in higher education cannot avoid. Thus the study should, inevitably, examine the implications of using concepts borrowed from the corporate world in providing a social service based on values and ethics. Green's (1994:7) comments in a book provocatively entitled *What is Quality in Higher Education?* on the use of commercial concepts and metaphors in educational policy raise unsettling questions:

Central to the debate about quality in the educational context is the issue of whether concepts derived from profit-centred private sector can be readily transferred to public service organizations. It is argued that commercial organizations are funded differently, have different objectives and face a different external environment.

## 1.7 SCOPE AND FOCUS OF THE STUDY

Although reference will be made to quality assurance policies in operation prior to 1994, this study focuses on quality assurance policies formulated and adopted by the national Department of Education after 1994. Apart from providing a critical overview of relevant policies, another aim of this study, which is linked to its empirical dimension, is to examine the various ways in which quality assurance and quality promotion policies are being implemented at the University of Durban-Westville (UDW). Thus in terms of its thematic focus, the study has two fairly distinct dimensions, namely the analysis of national policy texts on quality assurance and the evaluation of policy implementation at UDW. The study seeks to problematize the distinction made between policy formulation and policy implementation as outlined by De Clercq (1997:129):

Policy is often presented as a process made up of four distinct stages which follow a logical sequential order: policy initiation, formulation, implementation and evaluation. More specifically, policy formulation and implementation are conceptualized as two distinct and separate activities that have to be studied in their own right. It is argued that policy formulation is the responsibility of the politicians and their representative institutions and that policy implementation is the rational, technical,

administrative activity of a politically neutral bureaucracy whose actions are directed at the achievement of the policy objectives or directives of the politicians.

While offering a critical analysis of the nature, purpose, context and content of quality assurance policies this study will also challenge the assumptions underpinning the rationalist conception of the policy process as outlined above. In its focus on policy formulation and policy implementation the study seeks to interrogate what De Clercq has referred to as “ the inevitable gap that develops between intended and actual policies” (1997:129). Conceptualising policies both as *texts* and as *discourses*, as this study seeks to do, has the advantage of reminding us of the plurality of possible interpretations and thus possible ways of implementation of policy texts. Confirming De Clercq’s views, Stephen Ball, a respected scholar of policy studies (see Ball, 1990), alerts us to the difficulty of anticipating interpretations or ‘readings’ of policies:

The point is that we cannot predict or assume how they [policy texts] will be acted on, what their immediate effect will be, what room for manoeuvre actors will find for themselves. Action may be constrained differently (even tightly) but is not determined by policy. Solutions to the problems posed by policy texts will be localized and should be expected to display *ad hocery* and messiness. (1993: 12)

Ball (1990:10) further points out that ‘the analysis of complex social issues ... precludes the possibility of single theory explanations.’ And that ‘what we need in policy analysis is a toolbox of diverse concepts and theories.’ In line with Ball’s thinking on this issue, this study looks at both the ‘ad hocery’ and ‘messiness’ of policy implementation at UDW.

## 1.8 THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

In the light of the above, the following main research question is formulated: How is quality assurance being implemented in South African higher education with special reference to the University of Durban-Westville? The following sub-questions relating to the main research questions will be answered in the course of this study:

- (i) What are the key issues and trends in policy and practice of quality assurance worldwide?
- (ii) What are the recent policy developments in the field of quality assurance in South Africa?
- (iii) How is quality assurance implemented at the University of Durban-Westville?
- (iv) What is the nature and extent of conformity or discrepancy between the government's intended policies and the policies that are being implemented at UDW?

The first two questions focus on the international trends and practices in the field of quality assurance whereas the last two relate to issues of implementation in a particular institutional context.

## 1.9 AIMS OF THE STUDY

In the light of the above mentioned research problem, the following aims are formulated for the study:

- i) The study investigates the key issues and trends in the policy and practice of quality assurance of higher education worldwide, with special reference to recent developments in South Africa.
- ii) The study examines international models of quality assurance management with a view to ascertaining their relevance to the South African context.
- iii) The study investigates the current implementation of quality assurance at the university of Durban-Westville, in the light of the government policy for the implementation of quality assurance in the South African higher education system. Related to the above-mentioned aim, the study further seeks to examine, by means of qualitative methods, the ways in which managers responsible for the implementation of QA policies at UDW *understand* and *interpret* national policies.
- iv) The study seeks to examine the relationship between the government's intended policies as articulated in key policy documents and the policies that are being implemented at the university of Durban-Westville.

As shown in the aims listed above, the broader and more general focus of the study will be on the policies of the Department of Education at national level while the specific and limited focus of the study will be on the implementation of these policies at UDW. In terms of thematic orientation and focus the study deliberately foregrounds issues relating to the models of **quality assurance management**. Accordingly, within the broader field of organizational theory the

study adopts the perspective of organisational learning theory (Senge, 1990; Schwandt & Marquardt, 2000; Frazier, 1997).

#### 1.10 THEORETICAL AND ANALYTICAL PARADIGM

The problem will be investigated by means of a literature study and an empirical investigation. The literature study will comprise international and national publications on the topic of quality assurance in higher education. Generally, these publications take the form of policy documents, commissioned reports, journal articles, books and chapters in books. As the central aim of the study is a critical analysis of quality assurance policies and their implementation in a specific context, the theoretical approach to the study is largely *phenomenological* while simultaneously utilizing systems theory and discourse analysis. A combination of these theoretical and analytical paradigms entails a complementary relationship between *qualitative* and *quantitative* methodological techniques in the course of data collection and analysis. The approach will be largely phenomenological as the data-gathering techniques employed seek to elicit responses reflecting the beliefs, opinions, assumptions, values, interests and perceptions of key participants and stakeholders in policy formulation and implementation both at national and local (institutional) levels. Central to the process of policy analysis is the hermeneutic concept of interpretation. Within the context of hermeneutics, interpretation involves making sense of a text which is inherently obscure, ambiguous or even self-contradictory (Taylor, 1999:16).

By adopting an organizational learning approach to the study of higher education institutions the study focuses on the interface between *agency* and *structure* as it looks at quality assurance processes and the structural frameworks within which they take place. Both the processes and structural frameworks

involve people who have to *interpret, analyse* and *implement* policy documents as they *understand* them within the constraints and opportunities of their internal and external environments. Systems theory also seems to be particularly pertinent in a study of this nature as higher education institutions are open systems characterized by unity of purpose with highly interdependent subsystems (Betts, 1992: 40).

At the national governmental level the study interrogates legislation and other pertinent documents or texts as definitive policy texts on the implementation and management of quality assurance in higher education.

### 1.11 RESEARCH DESIGN

The study incorporates a broad literature study which identifies and discusses various approaches to quality assurance in higher education. The first section of the literature study focuses on global policies, practices and trends whilst the second section looks at issues relating to quality assurance in the South African higher education system. The literature review is arranged thematically in terms of contentious issues in debates about quality assurance in higher education. Themes or topics covered include the value of internal and external quality assessment mechanisms, the distinction between quality assurance and quality promotion or enhancement and the relationship between models of quality assurance management and socio-economic context. In very broad terms the literature review raises theoretical, conceptual and analytical issues which are further explored within the context of the UDW case study.

The empirical investigation will be conducted by means of a case study in which the main data-gathering tool is a series of semi-structured interviews with key informants in management positions at UDW. Interviews will target the two academics based in the recently established Quality Assurance office at UDW,

the Deputy Vice-Chancellor in charge of academic affairs and research, as well as a Dean in charge of one of the six faculties.

As shown in the method for determining the number of informants from each category, the study will rely on purposeful sampling because of the fairly restricted nature of the population and the need to target those respondents in management positions. An exploratory questionnaire will be used as a preliminary data gathering tool to complement data obtained through in-depth interviews with selected informants. Questionnaires will be distributed to purposive sample of informants in key management positions including those who will be interviewed.

By adopting an interpretive and phenomenological/ hermeneutic approach the study seeks to elicit and analyze the various interpretations of key policies, mechanisms and procedures in the field of quality assurance and quality improvement at UDW. Once synthesized and analyzed, the collected data will provide the researcher with useful starting points for making conclusions, recommendations and suggestions about this crucial aspect of university management.

With regard to the semi-structured interviews, the investigation will also examine recurrent patterns, significant omissions, and preferences in the answers provided by respondents. In line with the qualitative nature of the study, a large portion of data analysis will involve the critical interpretation of assumptions, values and interests underpinning the responses of the informants to carefully formulated questions.

## 1.12 LIMITATIONS

The main limitations of this study arise from its qualitative and largely interpretative nature. The study is limited in the ways listed below mainly because of the inherent features of qualitative case studies.

- i) The sample used in this study is too small and this limits the scope for making general principles and conclusions.
- ii) The study focuses on a single institution and therefore cannot provide a valid basis for comparisons.
- iii) The qualitative approach used in the study requires the researcher to also play the role of a research instrument. This could be seen as another limitation because the researcher will be studying his own institution and colleagues. Combining the roles of colleague and researcher may compromise the value of the data as individuals may withhold information, slant information toward what they want the researcher to hear, or provide “dangerous knowledge” that is political and risky for an “inside” investigator’ (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992).
- iv) The study deliberately foregrounds the issue of the management of quality assurance systems and thus ignores other perspectives of looking at quality assurance which might include the relationship between quality assurance policies and teaching, learning and research.
- v) Changes in Senior Management made after the appointment of the new Vice-Chancellor in Jan 2003 have had a direct impact on the implementation of quality assurance policies at UDW. These changes also have a direct bearing on this study.
- vi) All the limitations listed above are traceable to the limited scope of the study. The choice of the research problem and methodology has been determined to a large extent by the limited scope of this investigation.

## 1.13 CHAPTER DIVISION

### *Chapter 1 : Introduction*

This introductory chapter outlines the central argument of the study and demarcates the focus, scope and content of the study as well as the chosen methodological and theoretical approaches.

### *Chapter 2 : The Management of Quality Assurance : Global and South African Trends*

This chapter provides a critical overview of the work already and currently being done in the field of quality assurance in higher education. In this overview, which takes the form of a literature review, the researcher adopts a thematic approach to the publications in the field of quality assurance. Themes or issues covered include the distinction between quality assurance and quality promotion or enhancement as well as the various ways in which academic development is being superseded by quality assurance. This chapter also looks at key policy documents issued by the South African government in the form of discussion documents, manifestoes, reports and legislation which have a bearing on quality promotion in higher education.

### *Chapter 3: A Critical Overview of the Management of Quality Assurance at UDW*

This chapter will provide a brief but comprehensive critical assessment of the history, policies and procedures relating to quality assurance at UDW.

### *Chapter 4 : Research Design*

This chapter outlines theoretical, conceptual and methodological approaches used in this study. A detailed justification for conducting a survey involving top and middle management is accounted for. A brief account of the both the systems and hermeneutic theoretical paradigm will be provided and the use of data-gathering and analytical techniques is discussed and justified.

### *Chapter 5 : Data Analysis*

This chapter focuses on data analysis and, on the basis of findings, suggests theoretically tenable strategies of managing quality assurance and quality promotion.

### *Chapter 6 : Conclusions and Recommendations*

This short final chapter focuses on conclusions emerging out of data analysis and on the basis of these, makes recommendations. Conclusions and recommendations will emerge out of the findings of the study and will deal with the policy process in its entirety including policy implementation and the subsequent modifications and revisions.

## 1.14 SUMMARY

Focusing on UDW as a case study, the study seeks to explore the ways in which 'readings' or interpretations, by academic leaders and managers, of policy texts inform policy implementation at the institutional level. In terms of theoretical approaches and methodology, the study is decidedly qualitative in orientation and thus conceptualises the implementation of quality assurance at UDW as a

case study (Huysamen, 1994:168). The main research instrument employed to gather the data is the semi-structured interview. Interviews were conducted with strategically selected informants.

Although the study is largely exploratory it also seeks to contribute to international debates about quality assurance in higher education. Accordingly, the next chapter offers a critical overview of central debates regarding the issue of quality assurance in the global context, and adopts a comparative thematic perspective with reference to developments in South African higher education.

## CHAPTER 2

# THE MANAGEMENT OF QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION: GLOBAL AND SOUTH AFRICAN TRENDS

### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides a thematic overview of contemporary quality assurance mechanisms, approaches and management strategies in the broader international context and also examines quality assurance policy initiatives within the context of South African higher education. Themes selected for discussion include:

- internal and external modes of quality assessment,
- the need for effective management of quality assurance in higher education, and
- the distinction between summative and formative approaches to quality assurance.

The chapter concludes with a more detailed discussion of quality assurance in South African higher education focusing on higher education legislation, policies and management structures that have a direct bearing on quality assurance.

The discussion in this chapter does not focus on quality assurance systems of particular countries, but uses examples taken from countries such as Britain, France, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the Netherlands to illustrate

emerging patterns and approaches in the South African higher education system. This approach is in line with the central aim of this chapter which is to demonstrate, by means of appropriate illustrations, the extent to which the South African higher education quality assurance system has been modeled, deliberately or inadvertently, on similar systems in developed countries. However, the focus is not on comparison as this is not a comparative study but a case study with a limited national (South African) and institutional focus.

### 2.1.1 ANALYTICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In terms of the analytical approach adopted in this study policies are seen as texts that lend themselves to various and sometimes contradictory interpretations. In line with this conception of policies, the analysis of pertinent policy texts examines, from a largely hermeneutical textual perspective, the intended meanings of key concepts as well as the discourses underpinning the management of quality assurance both at national and institutional level. Accordingly, the chapter looks at gaps, omissions, contradictions and inconsistencies in the relevant policy documents and management strategies. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the relatively open-ended theoretical approach used in this study revolves around the notion of *discourse*. The inherent advantages of this approach are outlined by Taylor (1997:25-6):

... discourse theories have enhanced the scope of critical policy analysis in a number of ways. The most obvious influence is the increasing focus on policy documents as texts, but discourse can also be drawn on to explore policy-making processes within the broad discursive field within which policies are developed and implemented. In other words, they enable valuable fine-grained analyses to be undertaken within a broader structural analysis.

The final section of this chapter interrogates both the rhetorical and practical validity of concepts around which quality assurance policies have been built in post-apartheid South Africa. These concepts include 'transformation', 'reconstruction', 'equity', 'equality', 'development', 'efficiency' and 'global competitiveness'. Needless to say, the notion of global competitiveness has such recognizably commercial connotations as 'profitability', 'productivity' and 'cost-effectiveness'. Thus the major challenge facing South African policy makers is to balance the competing and sometimes irreconcilable demands of equity on the one hand, and efficiency on the other hand.

The rationale for adopting this analytical approach is to show that while at a discursive or rhetorical level the discourses of reconstruction and social justice have achieved a semblance of coherence, at a practical level these discourses have failed to take into account the practical challenges of transforming a higher education system of a developing country with a history of gross material disparities. Accordingly, one of the assumptions informing this analysis is that quality assurance initiatives should take cognizance of the historical realities of this country while equally responding to global pressures and trends. A second and related assumption is that in a country with a history of racial segregation and the concomitant uneven distribution of resources and opportunities, quality assurance policies and mechanisms should develop and evolve out of academic development policies and interventions. Thus, instead of treating quality assurance and quality promotion initiatives as separate management activities, they should be seen as forming part of the broad activities falling under the idea of academic development. As explained in the previous chapter, the notion of academic development is consistent with the underlying principles of all total quality management systems. These principles include:

- Systems thinking
- Customer focus
- Continuous Process Improvement
- Management by Fact
- Participatory Management
- Human Resource Development
- Teamwork
- Leadership
- Long-term planning

## 2.2 QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION: AN .INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

As mentioned in the previous chapter, there is a growing worldwide interest in the issue of quality assurance in higher education. As Neave (1994), Vroeijenstijn (1995) and Van Damme (2000) have argued, this renewed interest in quality in higher education is traceable to specific political, economic and social circumstances. Although these conditions and circumstances tend to vary from country to country and from context to context, there are, however, discernible commonalities which include:

- the massification of higher education and the concomitant decrease of state funding;
- the belief that universities should integrate education and training as they prepare students for the complex and highly differentiated labour market and,
- the increasing autonomy accorded to higher education institutions by governments that can no longer fulfill their traditional financial obligations to these institutions.

Therefore, as Van Damme (2000:12) rightly points out, '[T]he emergence of quality assurance in the eighties had much to do with the "neo-liberal" and "neo-conservative" preoccupation with budgetary constraints, perceived decline of standards, performance, institutional accountability and "value-for-money" approaches to quality.' In a similar vein, Bleiklie (1998:307) in his essay on the management of Norwegian universities, argues that in a number of states in Western Europe **quality** has become the fundamental objective of the university as a corporate enterprise (cf. Introduction p.5) He goes on to comment as follows on what he sees as the mission of the modern university in Western Europe:

... the most important expectation which the corporate enterprise confronts is **efficiency** related to the rapidity and cost at which it produces useful services, research and candidates to benefit users, be they the university's own faculty, administrators, employers of university graduates, or buyers of research.  
(emphasis in the original)

In addition to the factors outlined above, student exchange and international co-operation have put pressure on governments to institute systems of assuring the quality of academic programmes offered by higher education institutions. Needless to say, both the vocationalization and internationalization of higher education presuppose some threshold of quality.

The ongoing debate regarding institutional autonomy and governmental control of higher education has also contributed to the renewed interest in the issue of quality. As Vroeijenstijn (1995) reminds us, governments in many European countries are giving more autonomy to higher education institutions.

'Governments are willing to grant more institutional autonomy, provided quality is assured.' (1995: 4). The idea of the 'offloading state' (Neave, 1994) is, however, incompatible with the role that European states in particular play in 'modifying the quality of the framework conditions under which higher education operates.' (1994:131). Neave (1994) points out, quite rightly, that European governments are 'asking for quality while being unwilling or unable to uphold their side of the bargain'. (1994:131) Predictably, the contentious phenomena of the 'offloading state' and the 'evaluative state' (Bleiklie,1998:299) are beginning to manifest themselves in South African higher education policies as well.

It should be evident from this brief account of international trends that there are striking similarities in the factors that gave rise to the so-called quality movement in the 1980s. As I hope to show in this chapter there are also remarkable convergences in the management strategies devised by governments and higher education institutions to monitor, assess and enhance quality.

### 2.3 THE NEED FOR EFFECTIVE MANAGEMENT OF QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEMS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Confirming Vroeijestijn's (1995) conception of quality assurance, Harman (1998:331) defines quality assurance as 'systematic management procedures adopted to ensure achievement of specified quality or improvements in quality to enable key stakeholders to have confidence about the management of quality and outcomes achieved.' Thus the success of any system of quality assurance hinges on the effective management of material and human resources set aside for this purpose. A number of studies on the theories, policies, procedures and practices of quality assurance and its management have appeared in the past two decades (Loder, 1990; Brogue & Saunders, 1992; Van Vught &

Westernheijden, 1992; Kells, 1992, Ball, 1985; Neave,1994; Vroeijenstijn,1995; Lim,1999; Lim, 2000; Moses,1995; Woodhouse,1996; Billing and Temple, 2001; Parry, 2002 ). Most of these studies often adopt a comparative perspective and usually take the form of synoptic surveys of policies and practices in particular countries. For example, in their study of quality assurance mechanisms in Britain, Williams and Loder (1990 :2) identify the issues of accountability to students, meeting the needs of employers, maintaining academic standards and financial accountability to government as some of the most the pressing reasons for the preoccupation with quality assurance in higher education in Britain.

Williams and Loder (1990:6) further provide nine responsibilities of quality assurance managers which have a direct pertinence to teaching and learning, but also to the general effectiveness of the institution as a whole. They argue that managers and senior members of any higher education institution need to:

- be clear about its strategic aims and the operational objective against which performance is to be judged in relation to the quality of teaching and learning;
- be familiar with the procedures and processes by which quality and standards are assessed and maintained;
- be able to demonstrate the operational effectiveness of the institution's quality assurance procedures, including the ways in which problems are identified and corrective action taken, and how good practice is identified and disseminated;
- be able to explain the various ways in which the institutional quality assurance procedures relate to external quality control mechanisms:

- be able to show how it analyses the relationships between resource utilization and both the quality of the learning experience of students (process) and the standards they achieve (product);
- be able to demonstrate how the career development needs of staff are identified and how the needs for enhancement of academic and professional qualifications, the improvement of teaching effectiveness and professional and industrial up-dating are met, and how they are prioritized in relation to the aims of the institution and the personal development of staff;
- be able to explain how and in what proportion staff contributions to teaching and to research and scholarship are rewarded and used as a basis for staff development needs;
- be able to demonstrate how the outputs of the various quality control and assurance mechanisms feed back into decision making procedures to ensure appropriate action is taken to maintain and enhance the quality of teaching and learning;
- show how it monitors its quality control and assurance procedures to ensure that they are effective and efficient.

The principles of strategic quality assurance management outlined above have a particular pertinence to any quality assurance system premised on the idea of continuous process and product improvement.

In his study of the management of quality assurance in Australian higher education system Harman (1994:26) sums up the challenge facing the academic community with regard to the management of quality as that of designing 'appropriate mechanisms for evaluation that will achieve effective monitoring and facilitate self-improvement'. Similarly, Askling (1997: 25) makes a comment about the importance of setting up governmental and

institutional management structures to monitor and promote quality in Swedish higher education:

The demand on external quality monitoring,..., has in various ways encouraged the institutions not just to establish routines for management of quality but for elaborating infrastructures for quality enhancement, and thus for making quality monitoring an important aspect of institutional management.

As shown in the comments quoted above, the management of quality assurance in higher education is a complex and multi-faceted task that should be handled by people with the appropriate skills, knowledge and expertise. It is also worth noting that most commentators (see par 2.3 above) do not distinguish between quality assurance and quality enhancement.

Another point that also emerges from a general reading of the relevant literature is that it is generally assumed that most if not all systems of quality assurance give equal attention to both quality *control* and quality *development*. For instance, this assumption is implicit in both Vroeijentjin's (1995) and Harman's (1994) definitions of quality assurance within the context of higher education. As I hope to demonstrate in my discussion of quality assurance in South African higher education, this unexamined assumption requires closer scrutiny and analysis.

In acknowledging the crucial importance of the effective management of quality in higher education, countries including Britain, France, the Netherlands, Australia and New Zealand have formed external statutory and semi-statutory bodies responsible for the monitoring of quality assurance mechanisms in their respective higher education systems.

Quality assurance policies and mechanisms in South African higher education have followed international patterns and trends already set by English-speaking countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Britain, Canada and the United States of America. As a relative late comer to the international debates and changes in Higher Education, South African policies have been significantly influenced by similar policies in developed countries.

#### 2.4 INSTITUTIONAL SELF-EVALUATION AND EXTERNAL QUALITY AUDITS

In line with the principle of institutional autonomy, the majority of developed countries identified above tend to give priority to institutional self-evaluation and to use external governmental audits for purposes of standardization and thus ensuring that all institutions conform to national policies (De Weert, 1990; Van Damme, 2000). As Vroeijenstijn (1995:7) has remarked, external quality assessment mechanisms are unavoidable as governments have to account to parliament for money spent on education. However, as Moses (1995:11) has shown in her study of quality management in Australian universities, the notions of academic freedom and autonomy are not always compatible with the demands of national accountability. She goes on to make the general observation that, 'The compatibility of quality assurance with academic autonomy is a key question facing higher education systems everywhere'.

The tension between internal evaluation of quality and external quality audits is perhaps the most contentious issue regarding the implementation of quality management systems worldwide. As Moses (1995:14) rightly points out, academics feel threatened by the various forms of government intrusion in their work:

Academics experience an impingement on their autonomy and creative space through performance reviews, student evaluations, accreditation, pressure for open consultation, pressure for inclusion of stakeholder views, pressure to obtain research grants, pressure to publish, pressure to plan, predict, perform according to negotiated standards - all of this with reduced funding.

However, literature on the management of quality in higher education (De Weert, 1990; Lim 1999; Neave, 1994; Vroeijenstijn, 1995) reflects ongoing attempts to reconcile institutional autonomy with accountability as both systems of quality assessment seem to have their inherent merit. In his study of quality assurance in Western European countries, De Weert (1990: 62), comments as follows on the complementary nature of external and internal audits:

First of all, it is generally acknowledged that institutions should primarily be responsible for the quality of their education, their research and their other services. Evaluation services initiated by and carried out by the institution or its constituent parts will presumably contribute to the improvement of educational quality. This internal evaluation is complemented with external evaluation carried out by bodies or groups from without the institution: government, inspectorate, validation- or visiting bodies, peers, employers.

The tension between external and internal modes of quality assessment reflects the broader tension between the need for *accountability* and the equally important need for *continuous improvement* at the institutional level. As Vroeijenstijn (1995:9) succinctly and strikingly puts it, 'it is not possible to

provide accountability without external review or quality improvement without self-evaluation.'

Middlehurst (1997:48) provides a convincing distinction between quality assurance and quality enhancement:

... quality assurance is concerned with establishing that objectives are being achieved consistently and reliably, while quality enhancement is concerned with improving on or changing the original objectives, aims or purposes.

With regard to the issue of external and internal audits South Africa seems to have followed the example of most European and other commonwealth countries (cf. Lemmer, 1999: 184). As shown in *Education White Paper 3 : A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education* the approach adopted by the South African government conforms to the international pattern outlined by De Weert above:

The primary responsibility for quality assurance rests with higher education institutions. However, there is an important role for an umbrella authority responsible quality promotion and assurance throughout the system.

Interestingly, the British system of quality assurance management in higher education operates along similar lines. The editorial of *The Bulletin of the Quality Agency for Higher Education* is worth quoting at length as this system has had a significant influence on the South African system:

One of the Agency's principal tasks is to reinforce the institutions' own capacity and effectiveness as guardians and stewards of

academic quality and standards. Outside review bodies or inspectorates, visiting institutions or departments every five or six years, can at best have a limited impact on the quality and standards delivered day-to-day (albeit a dramatic and decisive impact at times). The effective way of assuring and improving quality on a continuing basis is to ensure that institutions recognize their own responsibilities and actively meet the resulting challenge. This principle is underpinning the development of new quality assurance arrangements. (2001: 14)

Debates around the value of internal and external quality assessments as well as audits reflect differing perspectives on the two dimensions of quality assurance, namely *assurance* and *enhancement*. Although the two dimensions are fairly distinct, it would not be entirely accurate to portray them as mutually exclusive. Middlehurst (1997:49) explains how quality enhancement can develop from effective strategies of quality assurance:

Quality enhancement should also flow out from quality assurance by investigating and correcting failures or lacunae in systems and procedures and by spreading good practice identified in the review of one area of activity by disseminating this to other areas. In these forms, quality enhancement is part of a feedback loop which, if recognized, noted and acted upon, should lead to incremental improvement in practice.

## 2.5 QUALITY ASSURANCE VERSUS QUALITY ENHANCEMENT

There is some merit in the argument (Vroeijenstijn, 1995) that 'quality control' and 'quality measurement' are summative in nature and convey the idea of punishment or reward. According to this view, quality control is inherently

punitive as it imposes sanctions for unsatisfactory performance while not providing opportunities for improvement. On the issue of quality audits and institutional improvement, Harman (1994: 26) identifies the main challenges facing higher education institutions in Australia:

What has been lacking in most Australian universities is a really professional approach to evaluation and to the monitoring of their own activities. The challenge for the academic community is to help design appropriate mechanisms for evaluation that will achieve effective monitoring and **facilitate self-improvement**, and at the same time will do minimum damage to the way in which academic work is best carried out and to the professional independence that academics need. (my emphasis)

Harman's formulation of the central challenges facing higher education as it confronts the demand for accountability suggests that he doesn't see quality assurance as only comprising externally-imposed set of monitoring mechanisms, but also acknowledges the need to link **quality assurance** to **quality promotion**. Implicit in Harman's comments is the view that organizational development, which in the case of universities normally takes the form of academic development in its various manifestations, should be central to quality assurance initiatives. Thus in an ideal situation quality assurance should combine both summative and formative functions.

In line with current debates around quality *improvement* and quality *control* (Sachs, 1994) this study distinguishes between two fairly distinct but by no means incompatible approaches to the theorizing, formulation and implementation of quality assurance policies. On the one hand, there is a belief, often supported by government bureaucrats that quality assurance is about the

evaluation and assessment of institutional performance. This could be seen as the rationale for the establishment of the *Higher Education Quality Committee* and giving it the status and authority of a statutory monitoring and controlling body of the South African higher education system. On the other hand, quality assurance is seen as forming part of other management activities and processes within higher education institutions aimed at ensuring the continuous organizational development of its core functions. In other words, according to this approach quality assurance and quality promotion, especially the latter, is inextricably linked to academic development.

Academic development is a holistic institutional activity involving student, staff and curriculum development. This conception of the management of quality assurance aligns itself with the notion of quality promotion or enhancement rather than with the rather vague and largely mechanistic idea of 'assurance'. This is a far cry from viewing quality as something that needs to be *controlled, assessed, monitored and evaluated*. Often, in the former approach, the process of evaluation is punitive in that it rewards those institutions that meet predetermined standards with incentives such as additional funding or a higher rating. Sachs (1994:22) outlines the tension between the two approaches in the Australian context:

Current debates about quality in Australia are driven by political and economic agendas imposed by the Federal Government. Not surprisingly then, the form quality takes within universities has become an arena for debate. Consequently a tension has emerged at the institutional level between quality as a measure for accountability and quality as a **means for transformation and improvement**. ( my emphasis)

In conclusion, Elton's (1992:3) illuminating distinction between what he calls 'the Quality A's and Quality E's' is worth quoting at length as it highlights the gap that exists between the two conceptions of quality management in higher education:

We have had Quality Assurance, Accountability, Audit and Assessment. ... it is time we moved to another letter: from A to E, from all the Quality A's to Quality Enhancement. ... All the A's are concerned with Control – not only of quality but also of people who control quality. Enhancement by contrast is concerned Empowerment, Enthusiasm, Expertise and Excellence.

## 2.6 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE SOUTH AFRICAN QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM

Sachs's observations have a particular pertinence to the South African context where there is a clear relationship between *The National Plan for Higher Education* (2001) and the *Human Resource Development Strategy for South Africa (2001)* of the Department of Labour. It could be argued that quality assurance policies in South Africa, like other policies aimed at restructuring the higher education sector, are driven by economic and political agendas which have an important global or international dimension (Subotzky,1997). No analysis of South African education policies can do justice to their historical and political provenance if it ignores such policy texts as the *Framework for Lifelong Learning* (1993) and *A Policy Framework for Education and Training* (1994). It is equally important to take into account the impact of broader socio-economic policies on education policies. These interconnections in social policy remind us of the inherently systemic nature of policy formulation and, by extension, policy analysis. The

government's preoccupation with 'quality' in higher education could be easily linked to the discourse of 'economic efficiency' which it has consistently used to justify its abandonment of the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) and its subsequent replacement with a neo-liberal policy known as the Growth Employment and Redistribution (Gear) policy. The predictable consequences of the latter policy have been reduced social spending, the privatisation of state assets and public institutions, all of which signal the dismantling of the welfare state (Bond, 2000).

The bureaucratic structures created by the government including the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), the Council on Higher Education (CHE) and the HEQC all indicate that the government would like to play a central role in the ensuring that higher education institutions conform to the statutory requirements of government policies. This is confirmed in the HEQC's *Programme for Accreditation Framework* :

The Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) is preparing to introduce a national system of quality assurance that encompasses institutional audit, programme evaluation and accreditation, in order to discharge the statutory responsibilities accorded to it by the *Higher Education Act of 1997* and the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) regulations for accredited Education and Training Quality Assurers (ETQAs). (2002 :1)

It would seem that the government is not interested in development and continuous improvement but in monitoring compliance with predetermined bureaucratic requirements. The model preferred by the

South African government conforms to what De Weert (1990:65) has described as the “regulation model”. De Weert’s (1990: 64) comments on the inherent shortcomings of this model are quite illuminating:

Because of the accent on summative evaluation, a regulation model of quality control tends inherently to advocate explicit goals for which there are readily apparent indicators available. Goals which are measurable will have a greater weight than those which are not. This frequent measuring can distort goals on other levels and tends to encourage overproduction of highly measurable items and neglect of the less measurable ones.

The regulation model also encourages a preoccupation with measuring the **result** or **product** and ignoring the **processes** which give rise to it. Consequently, monitoring agencies such as the HEQC will end up measuring all sorts of things except those that matter most. What really matters in higher education does not lend itself to precise quantification and measurement. What really matters are the actual educative and transformative effects of teaching and learning. This, according to Perry (1994:35), is the defining feature of quality in higher education:

It cannot be said too often that the real quality of higher education must be measured in terms of what students know, understand and can do at the end of their higher education experience. These are unquestionably the criteria used by employers and by society at large.

In its choice of the regulation model, it would seem therefore that the South African government is more concerned with *quality control* rather

than *quality development or promotion*. These are the logical conclusions one reaches after perusing quality assurance policies and finding no coherent, workable and specific plans for academic development which should form part of quality assurance mechanisms and policies. The assumptions and values on which the system of quality assurance is based need careful examination if this country is to avoid creating a system premised on materialistic and utilitarian ideologies.

## 2.7 QUALITY ASSURANCE IN SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION: A BRIEF HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Quality assurance is not an entirely new phenomenon in South African higher education. Various forms of quality evaluation and improvement have been used by different institutions since the establishment of the first university in South Africa . These quality assurance mechanisms included but were not limited to:

- the system of using external examiners for undergraduate and postgraduate programmes ;
- regular course or programme evaluation seminars involving departments and / or faculties;
- comprehensive departmental reviews
- course and lecturer evaluation by students
- course or curriculum evaluation by professional bodies and national discipline-based organizations or associations
- Internal and inter-institutional peer evaluation of teaching, the curriculum and student evaluation.

What has been noticeably lacking in quality assurance initiatives is co-ordination and centralized management at national level. This could be attributed to the fact that quality assurance in South African higher education has been, until recently, an institutional management issue rather than a national or governmental issue. Thus, as Muller (1997:37) rightly points out, quality assurance in South African higher education has always been conducted within a context of academic freedom and institutional autonomy.

An investigation conducted by the Committee of University Principals (CUP), now known as the South African Universities' Vice-Chancellors' Association (SAUVCA), in 1987 led to the initiation of some co-ordinated efforts to monitor quality in South African higher education. In 1995 the CUP approved the establishment of the Quality Promotion Unit (QPU) tasked with the responsibility of encouraging universities to develop their own systems of quality assurance in line with their institutional or organizational needs and priorities. The QPU started its work in 1996. There were two main reasons for the establishment of the QPU in 1995 (Muller, 1997: 49):

- To promote quality at universities, as universities are in terms of their of their statuses responsible for maintaining academic standards and for quality assurance. The QPU was formed to advise and support universities in their efforts to promote academic standards. The QPU is independent of any university, functions with its own management board which is accountable to the Committee of University Principals (CUP).
- To assist universities to align themselves to reform initiatives in higher education, not least those related to quality assurance, in the interests

of establishing a coherent quality assurance system for higher education catering for institutional audits, programme accreditation and institutional self-evaluation.

It could be argued, therefore, that the QPU was the predecessor of the HEQC as it was set up to perform most of the functions now performed by the latter body. The QPU carried out its first two pilot institutional audits at Rhodes University and at the University of Port Elizabeth in 1997. These audits were conducted on the basis of the manual for institutional audits devised by the Quality Promotion Group, a body constituted by two members from each university.

Institutional audits were subsequently discontinued as the government had resolved to create a centralized and co-ordinated system of quality assurance that would be controlled by SAQA and would be in line with the NQF. While the QPU operated within the context of institutional autonomy the HEQC and related structures are guided by the notion of accountability in their activities. Brink (1997:134) reminds us that the QPU was established at a time when accountability was not a major concern of the higher education institutions. However, there was a very strongly felt need for institutional improvement in response to the challenges of massification and the demands of the new political dispensation. Thus, in the words of Brink, 'The Quality Promotion Unit audit programme was therefore devised with a nearly total emphasis on improvement; this emphasis also was a strong motivating factor for universities to willingly engage in the programme.' (134)

While the QPU was formulating its policies and conducting pilot audits the newly elected government was busy planning the transformation of

the higher education system as a whole. In 1994, and in keeping with its framework for education and training, the ANC government set up a National Commission of Higher education to look into strategies of transforming the racially divided higher education system it inherited from the apartheid regime. In its report the Commission recommended that 'the higher education quality system should operate within the framework of the SAQA Act,' and specified in clear and unambiguous terms, the responsibilities of the HEQC, a statutory umbrella body set up to manage and monitor quality assurance in the higher education system. It is notable that all later policy documents on the issue of quality assurance did not deviate from the recommendations made by this Commission in its report. For this reason, the report may justifiably be seen as a seminal policy document on this important issue. It is noteworthy though that this document could be seen as a sub-text of a broader text known as the Reconstruction and Development Programme:

The reconstruction and development policies which loom large in South Africa's present transitional phase will have a pronounced impact on higher education. New research agendas and new learning programmes will be needed to mobilize the cultural, social and economic potential of the country and all its people.  
(1996:2)

It is not surprising therefore that the Commissioners some of whom were well-known intellectual activists saw development as being at the core of quality assurance mechanisms:

Quality is not an internal institutional concern, but also an essential ingredient of a new relationship between government and

higher education. Government **aims** to steer the system by means of incentives and evaluation of institutional programmes rather than by detailed regulation and legislation. **A comprehensive, development-oriented quality assurance system** provides an essential mechanism for tackling differences in quality across institutional programmes. (1996 :8) (emphasis in the original)

Most of the studies authored by South African academics and researchers on the issue of quality assurance have tended to be largely descriptive and have focused largely on recent (post 1994) quality management policies and procedures. These studies include Whiston, 1995; Strydom et al, 1997; Kistan, 1999; Vally, 2000 and Singh, 2000. There has been a glaring absence of any attempt at a rigorous ideological, conceptual and philosophical interrogation of the assumptions and discourses underpinning the proposed system of quality assurance in South African higher education.

#### 2. 7. 1 RELEVANT POLICY AND LEGISLATION

Since the mid 1990s, South African higher education has witnessed a plethora of discussion documents, commissioned reports, policies and legislation on a variety of topics regarding its transformation. Recently implemented changes and those currently under consideration in the South African higher education system have been based on, and informed by, carefully considered policies the central aim of which is to create one integrated system of higher education reflecting the ideals, aspirations and values enshrined in the country's new constitution. Apart from the constitution which is the supreme law of the land and a general symbolic policy of the country, the most important policies in higher education include the *Higher Education Act 101 of 1997*, the

*Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education* and the *National Plan for Higher Education*.

## 2.7.2 THE HEQC AND RELATED MANAGEMENT STRUCTURES

In the field of quality assurance the *Higher Education Act* provides for the formation of a statutory body known as the *Council on Higher Education (CHE)* which, in turn, has the responsibility of establishing the *Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC)* which performs the quality promotion and quality assurance functions for the CHE. As outlined in *Education White Paper 3* the key functions of the HEQC involve:

- promoting quality assurance in higher education
- auditing the quality assurance mechanisms of higher education institutions and
- accrediting programmes of higher education.

The *Higher Education Act* further stipulates that the CHE and the HEQC have to comply with the policies and criteria formulated by SAQA in terms of the *South African Qualifications Authority Act 58 of 1995*. Judging from the formalised provisions and procedures created to cater specifically for quality promotion it is clear that the Department of Education takes this issue very seriously. Recently (June 2002) the HEQC released two draft policy documents for comment, namely, the *Programme Accreditation Framework* and the *Institutional Audit Framework*. It is interesting to note that in the latter document the HEQC deliberately foregrounds quality development, self-evaluation and sensitivity to institutional contexts as its main concerns. This is evident in the two quotations below:

The purpose of audits is linked strongly to producing evidence-based information to be used by the institution for planning, implementing and monitoring quality development and improvement. Such information will be used by the HEQC to make a judgment on the effectiveness of the institution's internal quality systems for teaching and learning, research and service learning programmes, and make recommendations for improvement. (HEQC, 2002a:6)

The HEQC will take the institution's own specifications of mission and objectives as a starting point for both the self-evaluation report and the external audit. It is assumed that institutional missions have taken national imperatives into account as articulated in the Higher Education Act, the National Plan for Higher Education, the Human Resource Development Strategy and other policy frameworks. (HEQC,2002a: )

## 2.8 CONCLUSION

This short thematic overview of international and South African quality assurance policies and practices raises some of the key questions with regard to the management of quality assurance. Most of these issues will have a direct relevance to the UDW case study to be tackled in the next three chapters. The following issues emerged from this overview:

- Although the common trend in most countries is to privilege institutional self-evaluation over external quality audits, the latter are essential if

universities are to be truly accountable to the various stakeholders involved in higher education.

- There is a growing trend to standardize quality assurance management systems. The most favoured system seems to be that underpinned by the principles of Total Quality Management (TQM).
- In its quality management policies South Africa attempts to strike a balance between local needs and the demands of global competitiveness.
- Higher education institutions require carefully considered management strategies to ensure continuous improvement of teaching and learning while responding to external demands for accountability.
- Higher education institutions, especially those in developing countries like South Africa, have to ensure that their quality assurance mechanisms are both formative and summative in design and orientation.
- The rise of what Bleiklie (1998) refers to as the 'evaluative state' has necessitated the introduction of corporate management styles in most universities around the world.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE HISTORICAL AND ORGANISATIONAL CONTEXT OF QUALITY ASSURANCE AT UDW

#### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter offers a brief overview of the structural frameworks, policies and principles underlying the management of quality assurance at UDW. The chapter also provides a synoptic account of the history of quality assurance at the UDW; discusses the organizational structure and responsibilities of the Quality Assurance Office (QA Office), and outlines the key functions of this office within the context of the university's other key activities. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the overall strategy implementation plans as outlined by the QA office in its internal documents such as its newsletters and position paper. Although the chapter is largely descriptive in orientation, an analytical perspective is sometimes adopted especially with regard to those issues which are the subject of a more intense scrutiny in Chapter 5. Thus an attempt is made to offer as complete and detailed a picture as possible without being unnecessarily critical or analytical at this stage.

The central aim of the chapter is to map out the extent to which the plans and activities of the QA Office will influence the key organizational functions of UDW as an academic institution. The other related aim is to examine the possibilities for UDW's quality assurance strategies for either conforming to or deviating from the published policies of the government as outlined in Chapter 2. Thus the chapter fulfils the need, in a study of this nature and scope, to provide the necessary institutional background for the investigation of the

implementation strategies of government policies by managers responsible for the implementation of quality assurance policies at UDW.

### 3.2 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Founded in 1961 as an ethnic university in line with the ideology of apartheid, the University of Durban-Westville has, over the past four decades, gradually transformed itself into a university with a multiracial student body more than 60% of which is currently African. This is in line with the one of the goals of the university as outlined in its mission statement adopted in 1997: 'to make university education accessible to all, especially to students who are financially and educationally disadvantaged, thereby opening up opportunities for their personal growth and empowerment.' In keeping with this goal, the Senate of the UDW adopted a policy called a '60-40 policy' in 1991 in terms of which the institution planned to admit at least 60 % African students to its academic programmes. According to Browing (1998:2) 'an immediate consequence of this shift in the racial demography of the student body is that more students gained access to UDW with less than adequate preparation in their formal schooling.'

Consequently, the new policy presented significant opportunities as well as important challenges in respect of student diversity and quality at UDW which the university has had to grapple with in the 1990s and in the first three years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is for this reason that the issue of student, curriculum and staff development occupies an important part in the broad agenda of quality assurance and quality development at UDW. The logical consequence of this approach is that at UDW quality assurance is not confined to the assessment of teaching and learning, or merely to 'academic outputs', but is linked to other organizational development issues as the university prepares itself to respond

adequately and effectively to the needs of the communities it has chosen to serve. At UDW, as in other historically disadvantaged South African universities, quality assurance is closely linked to the issues of student access, student development and academic support in their various manifestations. This accounts, at least in part, for the deliberate foregrounding of the developmental dimension of quality assurance in the preceding chapters of this study and in Chapter 5.

### 3.3 AN OVERVIEW OF QUALITY ASSURANCE POLICIES AND MECHANISMS AT UDW

Like most South African universities, UDW has relied on traditional modes of quality assurance such as the system of external examiners and professional bodies as well as regular internal institutional reviews, assessments and evaluations. Accordingly, the evaluation and improvement of teaching and learning used to be the responsibility of individual lecturers ratified through the appropriate management and governance structures such as Faculty Boards and the Senate. With regard to research, the university has its internal quality assurance procedures for research grants. All application for internal and external grants for research must go to the appropriate Faculty Research Committee, before a recommendation is made by the University Research Committee. With regard to the recruitment of academic staff, all appointments and promotions are made through the Human Resource Department together with Academic Staffing Committee. Strict criteria are in place and are adhered to very stringently by the Interview and Selection Committees. It is worth pointing out that the School of Educational Studies has been running a seminar series on teaching and learning for the past three years and has recently (2003) introduced a qualification: University Postgraduate Diploma in Education (Higher Education) (UPGDE) for those lecturers who wish to improve their

didactic skills. In the university prospectus (2003:HU 41) the purpose of this qualification is described as follows,

The purpose of this qualification is to advance the scholarship of teaching by enabling academic staff (lecturers, tutors, etc) to become effective teachers and learners within Higher Education.

Evidently, the university has always had its own conceptions of quality and specific operational mechanisms for its assessment. Prior to the current ongoing process of re-structuring, the following operational conceptions of quality and quality assurance were embedded within the matrix of policies, programmes and practices of the institution:

### 3.3.1 Quality as enhanced student performance and progression rates

In 1997 and 1998 a strategic planning process designed to generate data on the status of quality as reflected in student performance and progression across academic departments was put in place. Shortcomings identified through this process had to be rectified by managers including Deans, School Directors, Programme Coordinators and Discipline Chairs.

### 3.3.2 Quality as improved teaching and learning programmes.

As a direct response to the influx of under-prepared students from the early 1990s onwards UDW established the following academic development programmes to enhance the academic skills of these students:

#### 3.3.2.1 Bridging Programmes

In 1993 the Faculty of Engineering established a bridging programme designed to provide an alternative route into tertiary engineering education for students from disadvantaged backgrounds who do not meet the requirements for direct entry into the first year engineering course.

#### 3.3.2.2 Foundation Modules

A number of Schools at UDW especially in the Faculties of Humanities, Science and Engineering developed credit-bearing first level foundation modules specifically designed to enhance the knowledge and skills of learners who are not adequately prepared to cope with the demands of higher education.

For example, the Faculty of Humanities offers the following foundation modules:

- (i) English Language Development (UDW 100S)
- (ii) Academic Literacy (UDW110S0)
- (iii) Changing Society: Culture, ideas and Values (UDW130S)

#### 3.3.2.3. Mentorship Programme

In this programme, the mentors, who are senior students, provide a support network for students who are struggling to meet the demands of university life.

#### 3.3.2.4. Upward Bound University-wide Academic Enrichment Programme

In this project high school learners participate in a pre-university curriculum designed to equip them with basic knowledge and social life skills and competencies and to introduce them to university disciplines they may wish to

pursue. The programme's central objective is to improve the throughput rates of disadvantaged students most of whom come from townships and rural areas in the areas of science, engineering and technology, health sciences and commerce.

All these interventions are designed to enhance the quality of the teaching and learning programme at UDW. As shown in Chapter 5, they all form part of the university's understanding of quality.

### 3.4 QUALITY AS REGULAR COURSE EVALUATION AND REVIEW

Different Schools and Disciplines have regular reviews in which they discuss their academic programmes focusing on things such as module design, teaching and evaluation. On the basis of these reviews comprehensive School Reports are compiled. This exercise in itself is a valuable quality assurance initiative. The School of Educational Studies has conducted these reviews consistently on annual basis and produced informative and wide-ranging annual reviews.

However, in terms of management structures the university did not have people dealing specifically with the management of quality assurance mechanisms until 1997.

### 3.5 THE FORMALISATION OF QUALITY ASSURANCE STRUCTURES AT UDW

In response to the fundamental post-1994 policy changes with regard to the accountability to the relevant stakeholders, an interim Quality Assurance Committee was established at UDW in August 1997 under the leadership of

the academic registrar. This committee was subsequently disbanded as it did not have any authority to implement decisions.

As there was no permanent office or structure in place, a member of the then Faculty of Education was seconded to co-ordinate the compilation of the audit portfolio (See Browning, 1998). This was done in anticipation of quality audits initiated by the Quality Promotion Unit of the Committee of University Principals. During this period the University Management, together with the Strategic Planning Task Team, were engaged in an academic audit of all Faculties, Departments and Centers / Units. This initiative was in response to the request by the Department of Education for the submission of a 3-year rolling plan. Hence, much of the information needed for the portfolio was captured during this period by the QA Office. The following statements are contained in the University's three-year rolling plan with regard to the issue of quality assurance:

Quality assurance informs our strategic planning; there are powerful operational conceptions of quality and quality assurance embedded within the matrix of policies, programmes and practices of the institution. By improving and assuring quality across the University, greater efficiencies will result, by becoming more efficient in programmes and operations, more resources are available for quality improvements.

The Strategic Planning Task Team completed its restructuring exercise at the end of 1999 with new programmes, Schools and Faculties to be in place in 2000. A QA Office was also set up under a coordinator who reported to the Deputy Vice- Chancellor (Academic and Research).

At the beginning of 2001 a draft module evaluation policy and University-wide module evaluation questionnaire were circulated to all four Faculties through the office of the Deans. The circular asked for comments on two sets of documents. Both these documents were discussed at School, Faculty and SENEX levels. Taking into account the feedback from these meetings, SENEX recommended that until such time a comprehensive system of evaluation is developed, the use of the questionnaire should be on a voluntary basis. Subsequently, a notice was sent out through the e-mail to all academic staff. The circular stated that “should a lecturer choose to use the questionnaire the QA Office will offer the following support”:

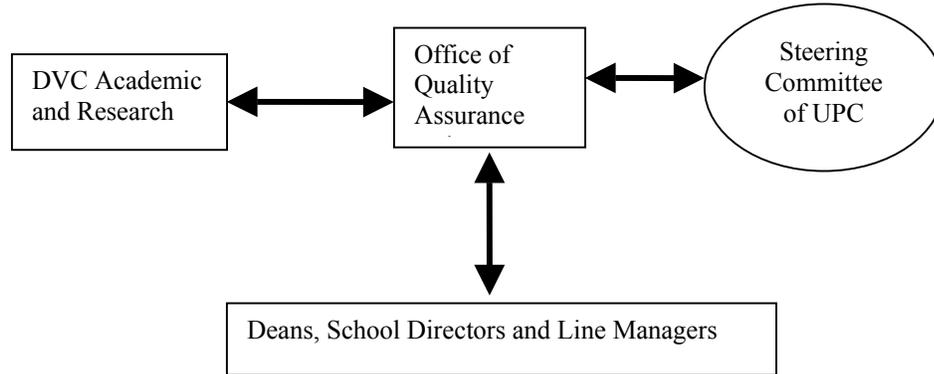
- ❑ Printing of the questionnaire
- ❑ Administration of the questionnaire
- ❑ Analysis of the questionnaire
- ❑ Written feedback or discussion on ways to address some of the issues.

In conjunction with this initiative, staff development, student support programmes and service structures for all academic activities are being addressed. An internal audit of student profile on each module taught is another quality evaluation exercise in place at the institution.

### 3.6 THE CURRENT STRUCTURE AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE QUALITY ASSURANCE OFFICE

#### The Structure of the Quality Assurance Office





As shown in the diagram above, the configuration and functions of the QA Office have to be seen in relation to the broader structural patterns of management at the university as a whole. The university has six Faculties and 22 Schools and 10 research/ graduate Units. The Schools are merely administrative centers embracing a conglomeration of similar or related disciplines. For instance the School of Languages and Literature is made up of all former language departments. Each Discipline within a School has its own Discipline Chair whose status is equivalent to that of a Head of Department in the old system. Most Schools also have Programme Coordinators who are in charge either undergraduate or postgraduate programmes in a particular discipline or set of disciplines. Both Discipline Chairs and Programme Coordinators are answerable to the School Director who is responsible for the management and administration of the School as a whole. The QA Office deals directly with all these managers and, in some cases, with individual lecturers. In the absence of any individual specifically responsible for quality assurance, it is safe to assume that all managers at various levels in the management hierarchy are responsible for both quality assessment and quality improvement. Obviously, the centralized management structure has implications for the assessment and enhancement of quality at the institution as a whole. This issue is dealt with in a more detailed fashion in Chapter 5.

The QA Office at UDW is staffed by two experienced senior academics both of whom were senior lecturers in their respective disciplines prior to being seconded to the QA Office in 2001. It is worth pointing out that the Director of the QA Office has extensive experience in higher education and has published articles in international and local journals (Kistan, 1999). Moreover, both the Director and his deputy successfully completed a certificate programme on Total Quality Management (TQM) at UNISA in 2002 (QA Newsletter). It is therefore not entirely fortuitous that TQM provides the conceptual framework for the activities of the QA Office at UDW. Although the office had already been operational for nearly two years, it was officially launched by the Vice-Chancellor in February 2002. The Office has the following functions and responsibilities:

- Assisting Schools and Departments in aligning, planning, assessment and improving initiatives.
- Helping Units in setting up quality assurance mechanisms.
- Designing and developing modules and curriculum for SAQA approval.
- Facilitating processes to improve the performance of students, staff and services.
- Providing information and building a knowledge base about quality, improvement, change and best practice.
- Providing opportunities to showcase best practice and excellence.
- Offering training and staff development programmes.
- Sharing information on benchmarks, best practice and national/international practices.
- Providing information and data to support university-wide decision making and supporting the work of the University Planning Committee, Senate and University Council.

- Supporting the University in its efforts to plan, assess and improve programs and services underpinned by the principles of total quality management.

(Office of Quality Assurance Brochure,  
2002)

The QA Office at UDW sees itself as facing the following challenges in its attempts to foster a culture of quality:

- To foster a culture of quality through awareness and information sharing.
- To identify and track progress towards achievements of outcomes.
- To use data to improve organizational performance and create corrective measures. (Quality Assurance Office Brochure, 2002)

### 3.7 THEORIES AND MODELS OF MANAGEMENT

As outlined in its internally distributed document entitled 'Quality Assurance and Total Quality Management' and the QA Position paper which are the main sources for this overview, the quality assurance office at the University of Durban-Westville subscribes to the principles underpinning Total Quality Management (TQM). Perhaps the most salient feature of TQM is that it foregrounds the status of the university as a learning organization (Senge, 1990; Schwandt & Marquardt, 2000 ) and gives prominence to the process of continuous improvement of all aspects and functions of the university as an organization. Therefore the approach of the quality office to both quality assurance and promotion is development-oriented and, accordingly, combines comprehensive monitoring of academic activities with strategic developmental initiatives. In line with the theoretical framework which underlies its activities the QA Office conceives of its role as an all-embracing one going beyond the

monitoring and assessment of the academic programme to include administrative and support structures as well. In its position paper, the QA Office is very explicit about the implications of adopting the TQM model:

While the primary function of the institution is teaching and learning, research and community service, there are other support service sectors that play an important role in the success or failure of the academic activity. (2002:6)

The all-encompassing aims and objectives of the QA Office are further explained by the Director of the QA Office at UDW:

Quality in higher education embraces many functions and activities, namely teaching, academic programmes, research infrastructure, staff, students and the academic environment. To improve quality in delivery, service and practice, one has to look into all facets of the university environment. (2001:3)

The Position Paper of the QA Office (April 2002) provides a framework for the implementation of a university-wide Total Quality Assurance Management System (TQMS) at UDW. The TQMS is designed to cover the following:

- Functions of the institution, namely, **teaching/learning, research and community service.**
- Services of the institution, namely, resource services, **student administration and support services, information technology and library services.**
- Aspects of the institution such as **governance, access, strategic planning, human resource planning and administration, finance management and physical / facilities administration.**

- **Management /Governance structures at the different levels of the institution.** (Institutional – Senior Management, intermediate- Faculties/ Schools, and operational - Departments and Units ) ( QA Office, 2002: 2) (emphasis in the original)

The implications of basing a quality assurance management system on the TQM principles are discussed at length in Chapter 5.

### 3.8 ENVISAGED FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

In his report the Director went on to make the following recommendations regarding the implementation of quality assurance policies and procedures at UDW:

- UDW should commence its journey on quality assurance and management by adopting a light touch approach. Although there is a legislative framework for the implementation of quality assurance in South Africa, the first phase should be the promotion of quality assurance, the development of quality capacity and of the mechanisms which are put in place. A prerequisite for the success of QA is the culture of co-operation and partnership as enunciated in the Founding Document of the HEQC (2001).
- If the QA Office is to succeed at any institution, there must be a visible commitment from Senior Management. This commitment must be given

to priority in staffing, resourcing, financing, and supporting the QA Office on a continuous basis.

- Student evaluation questionnaire across the board proved that “one size does not fit all”, each programme /school /faculty needs to formulate its own student evaluation questionnaire. Further, the student evaluation questionnaire will also be different at the level of the qualification, e.g. undergraduate and post graduate levels. (Kistan, 2001)

Evidently, the QA Office of UDW has definite plans, some of which have already been implemented, for the internal assessment of the academic programmes. These include:

- The preparation of a Teaching and Learning Handbook which will be a comprehensive university guide to the policies, procedures and regulatory framework on teaching and learning including the structures, processes and responsibilities.
- The identification and description of key characteristics of effective university teaching and learning and appropriate strategies for assessment, through a variety of strategies. This will include the implementation of the Student Course Evaluation Questionnaire, Peer- observation and self-assessment.
- The implementation of Institutional procedures and criteria for the (1) Registration of assessors (i.e internal and external examiners and, (2) moderation of assessment.
  - A comprehensive framework for reporting by external examiners which will include a system for recording and analyzing the views of external examiners, professional and other bodies.

- A policy and programme for monitoring student performance, including a review of exclusions, dropouts etc and recommendations for corrective measures.
- A system for the standardization of marks

(QA Office, 2002:7)

### 3.9 CONCLUSION

As this brief overview indicates, the implementation of quality assurance policies, mechanisms and procedures at UDW is still in its incipient stages. However, a lot has been achieved in terms of planning for internal and external assessment. The QA Office continues to use the module evaluation questionnaire which was successfully piloted and approved in 2002. In anticipation of the impending merger with the University of Natal, the UDW QA Office is has engaged in a number of discussions with its counterparts at that institution.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESEARCH DESIGN

#### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes the research design of the study and describes sampling procedures, data collection instruments, data analysis and issues related to the trustworthiness of the data. The chapter further outlines the conceptual and methodological framework of the study and explores the implications of the researcher's dual role as a research instrument and as a data analyst.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, this study is largely qualitative in orientation. Accordingly, it focuses on what Geertz (1973) and Denzin (1989 : 83) call 'thick description' and what Silverman (1997) ingeniously describes as 'the aesthetics of the micro-order' by providing an in-depth picture of the experience and views of key participants regarding the implementation of quality assurance mechanisms at the UDW.

In line with the broadly interpretive paradigm underpinning this study, data gathering instruments focus on the participants' understanding and interpretation of the process of quality assurance policy implementation within the relatively peculiar institutional or organizational constraints of the university. Inevitably, the national policies as outlined in the documents of the HEQC and the Department of Education will undergo mutations, modifications and adaptations as they are interpreted by implementers in a specific organizational or institutional context.

For this reason it is important to grasp the experience of academic managers directly responsible for the implementation of national QA policies as well the formulation and implementation institutional QA policies. As explained below, the study's research design reflects its central concerns as outlined in the research questions and also conforms to the standard requirements of qualitative studies in the social sciences. However, the choice of qualitative methodology requires some justification.

## 4.2 RATIONALE FOR THE QUALITATIVE APPROACH

Quality assurance mechanisms involving the participation of governmental agencies in higher education are a relatively new phenomenon in South Africa. It could be argued, therefore, that this study is largely exploratory as the notion

of a centralized and bureaucratized quality assurance system is relatively “immature” (Creswell,1994:146 ) in the South African context due to the conspicuous lack of theory and previous research on the topic. The first drafts of the two key policy documents of the HEQC were published in June 2002. As a consequence, no sustained academic studies have been conducted on the implementation of the quality assurance as outlined in these policy documents. If for no other reason, the quality assurance system in South African higher education system is “immature” owing to the lack of new theoretical and empirical insights into the management of quality in higher education.

There is therefore a need to explore and describe the experience of key actors involved in the implementation of the new system of quality assurance in the South African higher education system. Perhaps the most effective way of doing this is by focussing on a carefully chosen university which might reveal some general trends in spite of its institutional uniqueness. For this kind of exploratory study, a qualitative approach is deemed appropriate.

As suggested by the central research question in Chapter 1: qualitative methodology is particularly pertinent to a study with its focus on policy interpretation and its impact on implementation strategies. This approach is in line with the definition of qualitative research offered by Denzin and Lincoln (1994:2):

Qualitative research is multi-method in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to *make sense of* or *interpret* phenomena in terms of the *meanings* people bring to them. (my emphasis)

The underpinning principles of qualitative research as articulated by Lincoln and Guba inform the outlook of the research in this study. Consequently, both research instruments are designed to examine the *experience* of policy implementers in the chosen research site. To a large extent, this study is underpinned by the assumptions underlying the qualitative mode of inquiry as outlined by Merriam (1988: 19-20):

1. Qualitative researchers are concerned primarily with **process**, rather than outcomes or products.
2. Qualitative researchers are interested in **meaning**—how people make sense of their lives, experiences, and their structures of the world.
3. The qualitative researcher is the **primary instrument** for data collection and analysis. Data are mediated through this human instrument, rather than through inventories, questionnaires, or machines.
4. Qualitative research involves **fieldwork**. The researcher physically goes to the people, setting, site, or institution to observe or record behavior in its natural setting.
5. Qualitative research is **descriptive** in that the researcher is interested in process, meaning, and understanding gained through words or pictures.
6. The process of qualitative research is **inductive** in that the researcher builds abstractions, concepts, hypotheses, and theories from details.

(emphasis in the original)

#### 4.3 RESEARCH DESIGN

This section focuses on the selection of respondents and informants to participate in the data collection process involving both research instruments, namely, the questionnaire and the semi-structured interview. As shown below,

the two research instruments, because of their inherent features as well as their function and purpose in this particular investigation, require slightly different sampling procedures.

#### 4.3.1 SAMPLING

##### 4.3.1.1 SELECTION OF SITE

UDW is chosen as the research site of this study mainly because the researcher is a member of the academic staff at this university and is therefore familiar with the recent policy and organisational changes at this institution. Another reason for choosing UDW as a research site is that it has a fully operational Quality Assurance Office established in the 1997 and therefore has the requisite human and material resources to implement government policies on quality assurance.

##### 4.3.1.2 SAMPLING OF QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONDENTS

Data are gathered by means of a questionnaire which will gather the managers' opinion about the implementation of quality assurance mechanisms at UDW. A comprehensive sample of top and middle managers involved in quality assurance is selected. The sample comprises:

- ( 1 ) Deputy Vice-Chancellor
- ( 2 ) Quality Assurance Office : Director and Deputy Director of the Quality Assurance Office.
- (3) Deans of six Faculties
- (4) Directors of all 22 Schools

In order to ensure a fairly good (above 60%) return rate of the questionnaire schedules a student assistant will distribute and collect them at mutually convenient times.

#### 4.3.1.3 SAMPLING OF INTERVIEW INFORMANTS

Five informants are selected for participation in semi-structured interviews.

They are selected on the basis of their leadership roles in the implementation of quality assurance policies at UDW. Selected informants include: the Deputy Vice-Chancellor, two quality assurance officers and two deans. Below, a brief justification is provided for the selection of the five informants:

The Deputy Vice-Chancellor is the most senior manager at UDW responsible for the office of quality assurance; the Director of Quality Assurance reports to him. All policies and procedures of the university regarding quality assurance have to be ratified by him before they can be implemented.

Deans of Faculties are the most senior managers in their respective faculties. They are, by virtue of their roles as middle managers, ultimately responsible for the implementation of all policies and procedures regarding quality assurance. They may delegate some of their functions in this regard to School Directors and Discipline Chairs, but they are answerable to the Deputy Vice-Chancellor for the overall implementation of all university policies regarding quality assurance.

The Deans of the Faculty of Science and the Faculty of Engineering are chosen to participate in this study mainly because these Faculties have foundation programmes which are part of the university's academic development programme. As explained in the previous chapters, the researcher in this study

subscribes to the view that quality enhancement invariably entails student, staff and curriculum development. Thus the criterion used for selecting Deans as participants in this study is their faculties' combination of academic development and quality assurance or quality enhancement.

The Quality Assurance Office is staffed by two senior academics whose main responsibility is to manage the Office and report to the Deputy Vice Chancellor. They are also responsible for liaising with external government bodies, formulating, in consultation with the university community, university policies and managing all aspects of quality assurance at UDW.

#### 4.4 DATA COLLECTION

As mentioned above, data will be collected by means of two data gathering techniques: a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. In his capacity as a research instrument the researcher may also be regarded as a data-gathering instrument.

##### 4.4.1 THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Apart from the biographical data, the questionnaire comprises 16 closed items and 2 open-ended items. The questionnaire gathers opinions on:

- conceptions and definitions of quality
- the significance of institutional self-evaluation and external audits
- the relationship between quality assurance and academic development
- the relationship between national and institutional quality assurance policies.
- the implementation of quality assurance mechanisms at UDW
- quality assurance and staff development

- the familiarity of senior managers with the relevant legislation and policies
- the evaluation of lectures and academic programmes by students
- any issue deemed relevant by the respondents.

Evidently, the questionnaire serves to expedite the process of gathering valuable information to be used in painting a general picture of the collective opinions, views and perceptions of managers directly involved in the implementation of quality assurance at UDW. However, the questionnaire is a secondary research instrument designed to collect the necessary background or contextual information which will facilitate the analysis of interview transcripts and thus contribute to the general trustworthiness of the study as a whole. The questionnaire schedule will probably take twenty minutes to complete.

As a research instrument the questionnaire was pilot- tested in a random sample including four middle managers in the Faculty of Humanities.

#### 4.4.2 THE INTERVIEW

The interview is the main research instrument in the study and will be used tactfully by the researcher to gather rich data from selected informants. Although the interview schedule is semi-structured it is framed by six themes or topics:

1. Institutional definition of quality
2. The implementation and monitoring of quality assurance mechanisms.
3. The relationship between national and institutional policies on quality assurance.
4. The purpose and nature of institutional and national audits.
5. The chosen system of quality assurance management at UDW.

## 6. Changing the attitudes of academic staff regarding quality assurance.

### 4.4.2.1 GAINING ACCESS

Permission to conduct the study was sought from the office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor in charge of academic administration and research who also happens to be the most senior university manager in charge of quality assurance. The letters of introduction written to all informants explained the central purpose of the study and requested the informants to set aside at least 45 to 60 minutes of their time to discuss issues relating to the management of quality assurance with the researcher.

The letters specified the six main topics to be covered in the semi-structured interview. This is a deliberate strategy on the part of the researcher to facilitate the exchange of ideas during the interview as the informants would have given some thought to the main themes. There could also be one or two cases where they need to consult their records in order to provide the researcher with accurate answers. To expedite the process of preparing for the interviews, the information contained in the letters was also sent to the participants by e-mail. The letters covered the following aspects of the study:

- The central purpose of the study and procedures to be used in data collection.
- The informants' right to voluntarily withdraw from the study at any time.
- Comments about protecting the confidentiality of the informants.
- A statement about known risks associated with participation in the study.

## 4.5 DATA ANALYSIS

One of the defining features of qualitative research is that it requires critical researchers who have the requisite capacity to explore and sensitively interpret complex data and, in the process, uncover hidden or implicit meanings which may not lend themselves to easy quantification. Thus, in qualitative research the researchers' aim is to *make sense* of the data in their various forms, look for recurrent patterns, manage complexity and rigorously explain and illustrate claims and generalizations.

A self-critical and sensible qualitative researcher should be careful of making grand claims about seeing things 'as they really are' from the ostensibly 'authentic' perspective of the participants in their natural settings. Instead, the researcher should seek to problematize what seems obvious, conventional and what is often taken for granted. In the words of Silverman (1997:249), 'The appeals to "authenticity" and of direct contact with human "experience" are, ... , part of the messages of the world we live in. As such they are to be explained rather than relied upon.'

In accordance with the points made in the preceding paragraphs, the following steps are followed in the data analysis phase of this study:

#### 4.5.1 ANALYSIS OF QUESTIONNAIRES

This involves getting the general views of a comprehensive sample of policy implementers. An attempt is made to quantify responses to the questionnaire schedule. The quantification of data takes the form of tables, graphs and tables. Largely, the questionnaire will provide descriptive statistics and common trends and perceptions. Generally, the data gathered by means of questionnaires will

provide the necessary starting point for the more detailed and in-depth analysis of interview transcripts.

#### 4.5.2 ANALYSIS OF INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTS

The following techniques are used to analyse interview transcripts :

##### 4.5.2.1 NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION

The first step in the analysis of collected data involves what Stake (1995) calls 'narrative description' which entails simply stating facts about the case as recorded by the researcher. With regard to the interviews, this form of description will entail giving a synoptic overview of the content of each interview before attempting to analyze it in terms of the themes set out in the semi-structured interview schedule. It must be pointed out, however, that narrative descriptions of this nature can neither be 'objective' nor 'accurate' as they invariably reflect the researchers' *interpretation* of data. In other words, the process of interpretation is not confined to a particular phase in the complex processes of data gathering and analysis, but pervades the project as a whole. The process of narrative description also involves highlighting recurrent ideas or concepts as this will facilitate the organization of data into themes at a later stage.

##### 4.5.2.2 DATA REDUCTION

The second logical step after providing a narrative description of the interviews would be to reduce the data into manageable categories in terms of the six themes or topics which form part of the interview schedule. In an attempt to simultaneously analyze data while reducing them into manageable chunks the following points will be taken into account:

- For the sake of consistency and logical development of evidence, the same themes used during the interviewing process will be used for *coding* and *categorizing* collected data during the analysis phase.
- It is during this stage in the process that that the researcher has to note *emerging patterns* and try to relate them to the answers given to questions in the exploratory questionnaire.
- It may also prove fruitful to *compare responses* given by different informants to the same or similar question.
- The researcher will critically analyse the words and imagery used by the informants and attempt to translate their ideas into *metaphors*.
- The researcher will scrutinize the responses and comments of the informants with a view to eliciting the underpinning *discourses* underpinning the utterances of the informants.
- The *similarities* or *differences* in the informants' answers, the words and metaphors they employ, as well as the discourses underpinning their responses may form a pattern which may be worth exploring as the researcher attempts to arrive at genuinely 'thick description' of the situation.

#### 4.5.2.3 DRAWING CONCLUSIONS

On the basis of emerging trends and recurrent patterns the researcher will be in a position to make some tentative conclusions and inferences about the implementation of quality assurance at UDW. Creswell (1998:154) makes the following apposite statement about what he calls 'naturalistic generalizations':

Finally, the researcher develops **naturalistic generalizations** from analyzing the data, generalizations that people can learn from the case either for themselves or for applying it to a population of cases'. (emphasis in the original) For purposes of comparison data gathered by means of questionnaires will be compared with those collected in semi-structured interviews. Thus conclusions, inferences and generalizations are based on both research instruments.

#### 4.6 ETHICAL MEASURES

As explained above, the anonymity of all informants will be assured in this study. In the final report, no references will be made to the participant by name but their job designations or levels of seniority in the management hierarchy will be used. Furthermore, the research office at UDW will be requested to issue an ethical clearance certificate for this project, and this will be appended to the final report.

#### 4.7 MEASURES TO ENSURE TRUSTWORTHINESS

In order to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings and conclusions of this study the following strategies, consistent with the assumptions underpinning qualitative approach, will be employed.

##### 4.7.1 TRIANGULATION

As mentioned above, the study relies on at least two research instruments, namely, a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. Although the latter is the main data-gathering tool, the questionnaires will play a pivotal role in giving

credibility to the views, impressions and comments collected through interviews. However, triangulation will not be confined to research instruments, but will involve sources and analytical models as well. As Creswell (1998:202) rightly puts it: 'In triangulation, researchers make use of multiple and different sources, methods, investigators, and theories to provide corroborating evidence.' It is also important to remember that triangulation according to Denzin and Lincoln (1998) is not only a tool or strategy of validation, but also an alternative to validation.

With regard to sources, the information collected by means of semi-structured interviews will be collated, where possible, with other sources such as policy documents, circulars, newsletters other pertinent sources. The main aim of this process is not only to establish correlation and consistency, but also to account for deviations, misinterpretations or deliberate distortions of official policies.

In terms of the theoretical and analytical frameworks, the main approach is thematic analysis. This approach is particularly pertinent to the analysis of qualitative data. Boyatzis (1998:4) defines a theme as 'a pattern found in the information that at a minimum describes and organizes the possible observations and at a maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon.'

#### 4.7.2 CLARIFYING RESEARCHER BIAS

An explicit clarification of researcher bias is essential in qualitative research as it helps the reader to understand the researcher's position and understand any biases or assumptions that might influence the study in various predictable and unpredictable ways (Merriam, 1988). In this particular study, the researcher's biases outlined in Chapter 1 and further elucidated in Chapter 2 revolve around what is seen as the close connection between quality assurance and academic

development. For the purposes of this study academic development refers to the continuous improvement of the core activities and functions of the university: teaching and learning as well as research. Thus academic development essentially involves improving the skills, knowledge and attitudes of lecturers and students in order to facilitate teaching and learning as well as high quality research. Inevitably, the process of academic development embraces student, staff and curriculum development.

The researcher's argument is that a quality assurance system which is mainly concerned with 'control' 'monitoring', or with meeting bureaucratic requirements is not compatible with the idea of the holistic or systemic continuous improvement of the university as a whole. The researcher is also suspicious of policies which seem to be impeccable at a discursive or rhetorical level but contain no explicit implementation strategies. These are some of the biases that the researcher should be constantly aware of, especially during the phases of data collection and data analysis.

#### 4.7.3 MEMBER CHECKS

This technique involves giving all or some of your participants an opportunity to check or verify your interpretations and findings. This method is regarded by Lincoln and Guba (1985:314) as 'the most critical technique for establishing credibility.' In this study only the four interviewees were requested to check the final report for any distortions and misrepresentations. Ideally, this should enhance the internal validity of the study.

#### 4.8 THE RESEARCHER AS INSTRUMENT

In any qualitative inquiry the researcher is a crucial research instrument as he or she has to constantly shape and re-shape the processes of data gathering and analysis in accordance with emerging data and new insights. The researcher has to ask probing questions in the interviews, interpret the data collected, decide on appropriate analytical frameworks, and ultimately draw conclusions on the basis of corroborating evidence. Therefore the researcher plays a central role in this project mainly because the main research instrument (the semi-structured interview) merely provides cues, and is not as rigid and inflexible as would be the case in a quantitative study.

Following the example of Levi-Strauss, the researcher in this study conceives of his role as that of a *bricoleur* or, in the words of Levi-Struass, 'a Jack of all trades or a kind of professional do-it yourself person.' (1966:17) The researcher as *bricoleur* is not only eclectic in his deployment of theoretical and methodological tools, but is also consistently self-critical and introspective. 'The *bricoleur* is adept at performing a large number of diverse tasks, ranging from interviewing to observing, to interpreting personal and historical documents, to intensive self-reflection and introspection.' (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998:4)

However, the researcher's awareness of theoretical principles which are supposed to heighten self-reflexiveness during the research process may not always translate into practical guidelines. Therefore the researcher has to pay particular attention to the context of his study and to his own role within that context. Admittedly, there are numerous ways in which my role as a researcher might influence the manner in which this study is conducted and, by extension, its findings. These include, but are not restricted to, the following:

- The researcher has been a lecturer at UDW for over seven years, as a result there some aspects of the university's organizational culture which he is bound to take for granted or to simply ignore.
- Most of the participants in this study occupy senior management positions. Therefore the researcher may not be as forthright or explicit as he should be in his questions because of fear of jeopardizing his chances of professional upward mobility. Power differentials play an important role in a study, such as this one, where the researcher is 'researching upwards'. This may not be a problem with regard to the questionnaires, but will particularly influence the interviews with top and middle managers all of whom are senior to the researcher. The status of the researcher in the academic pecking order will not only affect the way in which interviews are conducted but also the way in which the findings of the study are presented.
- As member of staff with a vested interested in the future of UDW, the researcher may deliberately portray the university in a positive light even when this is not corroborated by evidence. In other words, the researcher may not be adequately 'objective' in his analysis and interpretation of collected data.

It is therefore essential, mainly for reasons of trustworthiness, for the researcher to declare his biases and assumptions and to engage in a process of ongoing self-questioning as the study progresses. The researcher should also guard against the various and subtle ways in which his values, interests and preferences might influence his findings and conclusions. Although these perennial problems of researcher bias have no easy solutions, merely demonstrating that one is aware of them is a good starting point.

#### 4.9 SUMMARY

As explained in the preceding paragraphs, a research design in qualitative research is merely a set of guidelines which may be adapted and modified as the inquiry progresses. More than anything else, it is the researcher as the main research instrument who shapes both the collection and analysis of data as well as the formulation of tentative theoretical propositions based on the collected data.

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## CHAPTER 5

### DATA ANALYSIS

#### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

Relying on the information collected by means of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with selected respondents and informants, this chapter provides an analysis and interpretation of the data and draws the appropriate inferences and conclusions. The chapter begins with the analysis of the views and opinions of senior and middle managers as expressed in their responses to the questionnaire and proceeds to offer an assessment of interview transcripts.

In terms of structure, data analysis conforms to the study's research design as outlined in Chapter 4. The information, in the form of opinions and perceptions gathered by means of questionnaires, provides the background or context which is further illuminated and supplemented by the views expressed by informants in more in-depth interviews. As this is a largely exploratory rather than empiricist (hypothesis-testing) study, its conclusions and findings should be regarded as being largely tentative rather than absolute and conclusive as these terms could be used by researchers operating within the logical-empiricist paradigm. Nevertheless, the collected data reflect discernible patterns and trends which could provide a worthwhile starting point for more informative studies on the topic of quality assurance in higher education.

#### 5.2 QUESTIONNAIRE ANALYSIS

The questionnaire proved to be fairly effective as an information-gathering tool as it allowed the respondents, all of whom are academic managers at various levels, to reflect on the policies and principles underpinning the implementation quality assurance mechanisms at UDW, and to comment on the significance and relevance of national quality assurance policies. This reflection took the form of answers to questions which required opinions, attitudes, perceptions and comments on particular aspects of quality assurance and quality promotion or enhancement. In a comprehensive sample of 45 respondents comprising members of senior management, Deans, School Directors, Programme Coordinators and Directors of Units 24 questionnaires were returned. Significantly, all the different levels in the management hierarchy are represented in the returned questionnaires. Although some chose not to answer the two open – ended questions at the end of the questionnaire, all the respondents provided the required responses to the 16 closed items.

### 5.2.1 INSTITUTIONAL SELF-EVALUATION VERSUS EXTERNAL AUDITS

The table below (Table 5.1) reflects the opinions of academics in management positions on the issue of self-evaluation and external audits. It could be argued that these questions examine the tension between *institutional autonomy* on the one hand and *accountability* on the other hand. As shown in Chapter 2, these apparently irreconcilable demands on higher education institutions are central to contemporary debates about quality assurance nationally and in the global arena.

**Table 5.1**

**Perceptions of managers regarding institutional self-evaluation and external quality audits**

Perceptions of respondents N= 24	1	2	3	4	5
Higher education institutions should be allowed complete freedom to evaluate the quality of their work.	9	7	1	6	1
	38 %	29%	4%	25 %	4%
Potential employers should have a say in determining what constitutes academic quality in South African higher education.	9	11	1	2	1
	38%	46%	4%	8%	4%
Both external and internal audits of academic quality are an essential part of an affective national quality assurance system.	11	11	0	1	1
	46%	46%	0 %	4%	4%
The evaluation of the content and presentation of modules offered by the university by the Quality Assurance Office is a form of interference in the work of academics.	2	4	2	8	8
	8%	17%	8%	33 %	33 %
Students should evaluate the content of all modules for which they are registered.	7	11	1	3	2
	29%	47%	4%	13 %	8%
Students should evaluate the presentation of all modules for which they are registered.	11	12	1	0	0

	46%	50%	4%	0%	0%
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**Key: 1-Strongly agree 2-Agree 3-Neutral 4-Disagree 5-Strongly disagree**

Table 5.1 indicates the following:

- The majority (67%) of the respondents believe that higher education institutions in South Africa should be allowed complete freedom to evaluate the quality of their work. However, a sizeable number (29%) disagreed.
- 83% of the respondents are in favour of the involvement of potential employers in quality assurance mechanisms in South African higher education. It is, however, interesting to note that 13% of respondents felt that employers do not have a role to play in this regard.
- The overwhelming majority (92%) of respondents agreed with the view that both external and internal quality audits constitute an essential component of an effective national quality assurance system. Only 8% of the respondents disagreed with this view. 66% of the respondents disagreed, some quite strongly (33%), with the view that module evaluation by the QA Office at UDW could be seen as interference in the work of academics.
- 75% of the respondents felt that it was acceptable or necessary for students to be given an opportunity to evaluate the *content* of all modules for which they are registered. 21 % disagreed with this view.
- However, a significantly higher number of respondents (96%) felt that students should evaluate (only) the *presentation* of modules.

### *Analysis of Table 5.1*

- (i) It may seem self-contradictory that academic managers who are in favour of combining internal and external quality audits should also support the view that higher education institutions should be allowed complete freedom to evaluate the quality of their work. It would seem that although they are in favour of total autonomy - often equated with the notion of academic freedom- they are also aware of the need for accountability to the various stakeholders in the higher education sector. Academic managers understand that accountability is not always compatible with the idea of academic freedom and a style of management characterized by collegiality.
- (ii) As shown above (Table 5.1), some academics in management positions are beginning to appreciate the value of involving employers (both in the private and public sector) in the assessment of the 'use value' of the knowledge and skills acquired by university graduates in various academic programmes. Partly, this seems to confirm the university's understanding of quality as 'fitness for purpose' implicit in its mission statement. This finding also supports the fashionable view that education should be vocation-oriented and that graduates should have marketable skills to sell to potential employers.
- (iii) Most managers are also in favour of involving students in the evaluation of both the content and presentation of modules and academic programmes. Some academics are of the view that students are competent to judge the *didactic or instructional techniques* used by lecturers in presenting their modules, but that the same students are not qualified to assess the *content* of the modules.
- (iv) Academics are generally in favour of being evaluated on a regular basis by the Quality Assurance office at UDW. The majority of respondents

do not regard this as a form of interference in their work. This is largely in line with the views on institutional self-evaluation outlined above.

### 5.2.2 QUALITY ASSURANCE AND ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT

As explained in the previous chapters and evident in the framing of questions both in the questionnaire and in the semi-structured interview, academic development in its various ramifications is at the core of UDW's understanding of academic quality. Table 5.2 reflects the opinions of academics in management positions regarding the interconnections between quality assurance and academic development.

**TABLE 5.2**

**Perceptions of managers regarding the relationship between quality assurance and academic development**

<i>Perceptions of managers</i> <i>N=24</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>
The QA Office should take over the functions of the now defunct Centre for Academic Development at UDW.	6	9	6	1	2
	25 %	38 %	25 %	4 %	8 %
One of the central functions of the QA Office at UDW should be staff development to improve the quality of teaching and learning.	8	10	0	4	2

	3	42	0	17	8
	3	%	%	%	%
	%				
The QA Office at UDW should introduce a certificate or diploma qualification in adult and or tertiary education for academics without teaching qualifications in order to improve the quality of teaching and learning.	2	6	3	6	7
	8	25	13	25	29
	%	%	%	%	%

**Key 1-Strongly agree, 2-Agree, 3-Neutral, 4-disagree, 5-Strongly disagree.**

Table 5.2 indicates the following

- A significant number (63%) of respondents felt the newly created QA Office should take over the functions of the now defunct Centre for Academic Development.
- 25% of respondents opted for neutrality. Only 12% were against the inclusion of academic development functions into the QA Office.
- 75% of the respondents agreed with the view that the QA Office should regard staff development as one its central activities. The remaining 25% disagreed with this view.
- However, 54% are opposed to the formalisation of this process by introducing a certificate or diploma programme for academics who have no teaching qualifications.

- Only 33% of the respondents support the suggestion that UDW should introduce a certificate or diploma qualification in adult or tertiary education for academics without teaching qualifications.

## **Analysis of Table 5.2**

The following conclusions may be drawn from the points outlined above:

- (i) Academic managers hold different and sometimes contradictory views on the relationship between quality assurance and academic development.
- (ii) The QA Office should not only be concerned with evaluation and assessment but also with the development of the various components of the academic programme. Academic development in its various forms (see Chapter 3), is seen by the majority of respondents as one of the central functions of the QA Office at UDW.
- (iii) The majority of academics in management positions at UDW are of the view that the function of staff development, in its various forms, should not be sole responsibility of the QA Office but should be shared with the School of Educational Studies (see Chapter 3, par 3.3). Essentially what this entails is that the function of staff development should be left to the people who have or should have the necessary expertise in this area. Thus the professional training or re-training of academic staff should be handled by properly qualified staff in the School of Educational Studies. As shown in Chapter 3 (par3.3), UDW has made significant strides in ensuring the development of its academic staff.
- (iv) The respondents' opposition to the idea of professional training suggests academics who have no professional qualifications in

education regard themselves as experts in their disciplines and consider teaching qualifications to be superfluous. There is an unexamined belief that advanced academic qualifications and experience in research automatically translate into effective didactic skills.

### 5.2.3 REFLECTIONS ON NATIONAL AND INSTITUTIONAL POLICIES

**TABLE 5.3 Familiarity with national policies on quality assurance**

<b>National Policies N = 24 for each policy document</b>	<b>Total number and percentage of respondents who have read the policy</b>
1. Education White Paper 3: The Transformation of Higher Education	17 71%
2. The National Plan for Higher Education	18 75%
3. HEQC: Founding Document	8 33%
4. HEQC: Institutional Audit Framework	12 50%
5. HEQC: Programme Accreditation Framework	8 33%

Table 5.3 indicates the following:

71% of respondents have read the Education White Paper 3, which is arguably the most important policy document as it lays down the principles of the governance of higher education institutions in South Africa.

75% have read the National Plan for Higher Education which is essentially a policy for implementing the principles outlined in White Paper 3

33% have seen the HEQC founding document

50% have read the institutional Audit Framework

33% have seen the Programme Accreditation Framework

### Analysis of Table 5.3

- (i) The majority of the respondents indicated that they had read some or all of the national and institutional policies on quality assurance. This was a largely predictable response as all respondents are managers and as such are required to familiarise themselves with the relevant policy documents.
- (ii) Most respondents have read *Education White Paper 3* and the *National Plan for Higher Education* because these are broader and all-encompassing policy documents and have been in circulation for a relatively longer period than the HEQC documents which are relatively recent (June 2002).
- (iii) However, it is not fortuitous that 50% of the respondents have read the HEQC's Institutional Audit Framework as this is an 'inspection' document which has direct implications for all academics.

**TABLE 5.4 Familiarity with institutional policies on quality assurance**

Institutional Policies (UDW) N = 24 for each document	Total number of respondents and percentage of respondents who have read the documents in question	
1. Newsletters of the Quality Assurance	19	79%

Office of UDW		
2. Policy Documents of the Quality Assurance Office	15	63%
3. Documents issued by the Quality Assurance Reference Group at UDW	15	63%
4. UDW'S Strategic Plans	11	46%

Table 5.4 indicates that respondents are generally familiar with the policy documents issued by the QA Office.

- 79% have read the newsletters of the QA Office, while 63% have read all or some of the policy documents on quality assurance at UDW.
- 63% of respondents have read all or some of the policy documents issued by the QA Office and by Quality Assurance Reference Group.
- A significantly lower number of respondents (46%) are familiar with the university's strategic plans. This could be attributed to the fact that the university's strategic plans are constantly revised in response to changes in both the external and external environments.

#### **Analysis of Table 5.4**

- (i) These documents are all available on the university's website intranet and are therefore easily accessible to all members of staff. Moreover, copies all relevant documents are also sent to all members of staff manually. For this reason it is surprising that the scores for this are not consistently high (e.g. above 80%) for all items.

- (ii) It is clear though (Tables 5.3 & 5.4) that respondents tend to be generally more familiar with institutional policies than with national ones.

**TABLE 5.5: Possible Quality Assurance Mechanisms at UDW**

<i>Academic quality at UDW should be assessed in terms of:</i>	Number of times rated as most as important	
Institutional evaluation reports on the audits done by HEQC.	<b>15</b>	<b>58%</b>
The number of students who pass study programmes and graduated.	<b>2</b>	<b>4%</b>
Research grants and awards obtained by lecturers and other researchers.	<b>3</b>	<b>13%</b>
The number of students securing employment within one year of graduation	<b>4</b>	<b>17%</b>

Table 5.5 indicates that:

- The majority (63%) of respondents are in favour of the use of institutional evaluation reports as a means of assessing quality as opposed to using the number of students who graduate (8%), research grants obtained by lecturers and other researchers (13%) and the number of

students who are able to secure employment within one year of graduation (17%).

### **Analysis of Table 5.5**

- (i) It is evident (Table 5.5) that most respondents are against the use of student throughput rates as a means of judging quality. This is often used by government agencies as the most important criterion for assessing efficiency. In this study this measure received the lowest score of 8%. This could imply that the respondents have a very clear understanding of the distinction between efficiency and quality.
- (ii) Most respondents (63%) prefer a comprehensive evaluation process combining both internal and external mechanisms.
- (iii) The employability of graduates is seen as second most important indicator of quality. Needless to say, this view presumes a very utilitarian or instrumentalist view of quality. However, this conception of quality is in line with the underpinning assumptions of the corporate enterprise ideology (see Chapter 1 par 1.2)
- (iv) The capacity of academics to attract external research grants is also seen as an important quality indicator.

**TABLE 5.6 Possible methods of assuring and promoting quality at UDW**

<i>Effective methods for the assurance and enhancement of quality at UDW should include:</i>	Number of times rated as most important	
Systematic monitoring by external professional bodies.	5	21%
Peer evaluation of teaching and student evaluation.	4	17%
Regular internal and external audits of teaching and learning.	10	42%
Student evaluation of the content and presentation of modules they are taking.	5	21%

The distribution of scores in Table 5.7 indicates that respondents favour a multi-faceted approach to quality management and development rather than an approach that relies on one strategy.

- Regular internal and external audits of teaching and learning are the most preferred means of assuring quality as evidenced by a comparatively high score of 42%.
- Peer evaluation (17%) and monitoring by professional bodies (21%) are alternative methods of assuring quality chosen by respondents as taking precedence over all the others.
- A relatively low score of 21% for the use of student evaluation of modules suggests that this the least preferred method of assessing quality.

### Analysis of Table 5.6

- (i) As in Table 5.5, this table shows that there is a strong preference for a balanced system of evaluation combining external quality audits and internal self-evaluation procedures.
- (ii) External evaluation by professional bodies (where this is viable, practical and necessary) and student evaluation of modules are also regarded by respondents as methods of quality assessment that could lead to quality improvement.
- (iii) Peer evaluation received the lowest score of 17%.

**TABLE 5.7 The management and administration of quality assurance and quality enhancement**

<i>The management and administration of quality assurance and quality enhancement at UDW should be the responsibility of:</i>	Number of times rated as most important	
One central office reporting to the Vice-Chancellor	4	17%
Faculty Deans and School Directors	5	21%
Programme co-ordinators and Discipline Chairs.	4	17%
A quality assurance committee comprising all stakeholders within the university community	11	46%

As shown in Table 5.7 respondents have different views regarding the management of quality at UDW.

- The majority (46%) believe that quality assurance should be managed by a committee comprising all stakeholders within the university community. This suggests that the current management structure (i.e the QA Office) is not adequately representative.
- However 17% of the respondents believe that the current management system should be retained.
- 21% of the respondents are of the view that quality assurance should be managed by Deans and School Directors while 17% think this responsibility should be devolved further down to Programme Co-ordinators and Discipline Chairs.

#### **Analysis of Table 5.7**

- (i) Respondents prefer a truly democratic management structure to manage quality assurance systems at UDW. They prefer a decentralized system of management as opposed to the existing highly centralized management system.
- (ii) The ideal management structure should involve managers and other stakeholders representing the key constituencies who play a role in the core activities of the university i.e. teaching and learning, research, management and community service.

#### **5.2.4 NATIONAL POLICIES : DATA FROM OPEN ITEMS**

In response to the open-ended items in the questionnaire [ Section E : 1 & 2] there are varying comments on (i) the significance of national policies and (ii) the implementation of these policies at UDW. Below is an analytical overview

of those responses to the question about the significance of national policies on quality assurance. The following patterns emerge from the comments of the respondents outlined above:

- (i) The government may not have the necessary resources to implement its policies. As one respondent put it ‘Q A is important, but my feeling is that we have so few resources nationally and we are trying to implement sophisticated policies across the board without resources.’
- (ii) Some respondents feel that the government has its own hidden agenda driven by global market trends and national needs, but that these do not always correspond to the circumstances and priorities of higher education institutions. As one respondent put it: “The national policy on quality assurance gives a strong impetus to institutions to develop quality systems. However, there are, and will be, instances when national and institutional priorities do not correspond. The practice at national level’s HEQC shifts between developmental and policing/ punitive approaches”. However, some respondents are of the view that ‘market forces’ and global trends should shape South African higher education policies as reflected in the following comments: “National policies should be flexible enough to allow market forces to determine quality rather than it being regulated rigidly by government policies” and “South Africa is part of the global economy. If we are to compete in the world there has to be a national policy covering quality assurance in higher education.”
- (iii) South Africa has a history of inequality which manifests itself in the glaring material discrepancies between HBUs and HWUs. The questions that the respondents are asking, in different ways, are : (a) To what extent will the new set of higher education regulatory and evaluative policies take cognizance of these disparities? (b) Is it

realistic to speak of 'standardisation' in a situation characterized by inequality? The following comments all touch on these crucial issues:

- "This involvement by the state is long overdue especially in terms of the changing student enrolments in higher education and also because of the need for human resources for the country."
- "It is imperative, given our recent past, that legislation be passed and implemented to ensure that all South Africans have equal access to educational programmes that are relevant and market oriented. There is much difference between HBIs & HWIs in higher education - this must be remedied".
- "National policies do not adequately focus on obstacles experienced by individual tertiary institutions".

(iv) The most recurrent concept in these comments is 'standards' and the related (but also different in significant ways) notion of 'standardisation'. As shown in the comments below, some respondents seem to have a very idealist or even naïve view of standards; they also regard the notion of standardization as inherently positive.

- "They [the national policies] ensure that higher education is offered on the basis of nationally accepted standards"
- "It is imperative to have quality assurance in all programmes offered at tertiary institutions in the country. This is essential to maintain high standards."
- "The policies assist in improving the work ethic, productivity and in meeting national and internal standards."

(iv) Academics are (understandably) suspicious of the role of politicians and government bureaucrats in assuring and promoting quality. This

suspicion is summed up in two terse but telling comments on the significance of national policies : “Significant, provided that they are not politically driven” and “Danger of central government control.”

#### 5.2.5 INSTITUTIONAL POLICIES

Regarding the implementation of quality assurance policies at UDW those respondents who offered to share their views tended to express strongly held views and perceptions. Some of the issues raised with the regard to national QA policies also featured in the comments of respondents on institutional policies. For example, the concern for the maintenance of ‘standards’ and the assumption that ‘standardisation’ is inherently valuable were evident in these responses as well. As one respondent put it: ‘A comparison with those [quality assurance policies and procedures] at other institutions will be useful and essential in standardization.’

Most of the comments on institutional policies revolve around the thorny issue of effective implementation of national policies. The majority of respondents pointed out that they had not seen any implementation of quality assurance mechanisms in their Faculties, Schools or Disciplines except for the module evaluation questionnaire. Furthermore, the QA had not provided them (as academic managers) with the framework about the assessment and improvement of quality at UDW. The absence of effective implementation strategies is traceable to various factors some of which are captured in the comment below:

I think these [quality assurance mechanisms] are best implemented in the Schools. In the School of which I am Director I am aware of the limitations and can address these. Policies which the QA develops do not always relate to what is happening on the ground. Sometimes I feel the questionnaire is being used by the

QA Office as their research tool, regardless of its usefulness to the Schools.

What is implicit in these comments is the view that the QA Office is out of touch with the `realities' of Schools; therefore School Directors should be allowed to devise their own context-specific strategies of assuring quality in their Schools.

The most recurrent criticism of the UDW QA Office is that its understanding of quality is too narrow. The Office seems to think that quality can be assured by means of a standard and `rigid' module evaluation questionnaire. The comments of respondents on institutional policies also reflect a preference for a decentralized system of quality assurance in which Deans and School Directors would play key roles in assuring quality in their respective fields of management. The following comment by one respondent sums up these views:

Rigid questionnaires are not useful in gaining insight into what others think of quality. Greater freedom and flexibility should be given to staff and students to participate in evaluating quality.

Respondents also expressed concerns about the lack of resources (human and material) for implementing effective quality assurance mechanisms. The comments quoted below deal with this issue:

- “The QA Office needs to be equipped with more resources, especially human resources. The implementation of policies is an open process. It has been consultative as far as policy directives are concerned.”
- “There is no real implementation of QA at UDW. This is not a reflection on the staff in the QA Office but of resources made available for

effective QA e.g the problems related to the library, inadequate lecture venues, tutorial rooms etc.”

In conclusion, respondents are generally agreed that no effective QA system has been implemented at UDW. There has been a lot of ‘preparation’ for the imminent HEQC audits which has taken the form of meetings and workshops but nothing, besides the evaluation questionnaire, has emerged from these deliberations. It could be argued that the managers’ opinions, as reflected in their various comments, suggest that the implementation is still in its initial or planning phase. As one respondent tellingly put it, ‘the implementation of quality assurance at UDW is still in its infancy.’

### 5.3 ANALYSIS OF INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTS

This section provides an analysis of the interviews conducted with selected informants directly involved in the implementation of national quality assurance policies at UDW. Each interview took between 1 – 1 1/2hrs and all interviews were conducted in the offices of the informants during times which were convenient to both the researcher and the informants. The actual phrasing of the questions and the probing questions were aimed at facilitating frank and open discussion of issues. The fact that the researcher is well known to all the informants could have enhanced the quality of the information gathered but also it could have encouraged interviewees to assume that the researcher knew some of the things he did not know.

All the interviews conducted with selected informants yielded rich and sometimes apparently contradictory information. The purpose of this brief descriptive overview of the content of each interview transcript is get a sense of the scope, depth and internal coherence of each interview. This should facilitate

coding and analysis which will be done in the next sub-section. However, as pointed out in the previous chapter, description is a form of analysis and interpretation as it involves the transformation of a 'field text' into a 'research text' (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998: 161-2).

### 5.3.1 THE DEPUTY VICE-CHANCELLOR (ACADEMIC & RESEARCH)

The Deputy Vice Chancellor interprets the notion of academic quality to mean 'best practice', but as he went on to explain, best practice should be seen within the broader sociological or political context or what the Deputy Vice Chancellor called 'the legacy of apartheid'. All discussions of 'quality' at UDW should take cognizance of the 'poverty' that characterizes the communities served by the university. Thus, according to him quality should be seen in relation to the various forms of material deprivation the main consequence of which is that UDW's first- entry students are not adequately prepared to cope with the demands of university education.

When asked to comment on the 'control' and 'developmental' dimensions of quality assurance he pointed out that the two were not and should not be mutually exclusive. The university's mission statement, he went on to say, refers to both **excellence** and **equity** as central to the activities of the institution. To him this seems 'paradoxical' as equity is not always compatible with excellence. The following points were also raised by the Deputy Vice Chancellor in response to questions raised by the researcher:

- the Quality Assurance Office should be independent of the academic development initiatives at the university
- Quality assurance mechanisms at UDW should be premised on a broad and all-encompassing conception of quality which is not confined to the teaching and learning and associated activities, but also embraces

administration, management and support services. The Deputy Vice Chancellor explained that his conception of quality is holistic and underpinned by the principles of systems theory according to which all components, structures and members of an organization are interdependent and all contribute to the attainment of common organisational goals.

- The management of quality assurance should be decentralized to ensure that all line-managers (School Directors, Programme coordinators, and Discipline Chairs) play an active role in the implementation of national and institutional policies and procedures.
- The Deputy Vice Chancellor went on to enumerate practical steps taken by the university to implement its own policies and those of the HEQC: these included,
  - (i) the design of an evaluation questionnaire which is currently being used to evaluate both the content and the presentation of all the modules offered by the university;
  - (ii) making it mandatory for all lecturers to provide comprehensive module outlines which specify the outcomes or objectives of the modules offered, their content, evaluation mechanisms and a secondary reading list;
  - (iii) making it obligatory for all Deans, School Directors and Heads of Units to ensure that appropriate procedures are followed in the promotion and assurance of quality in the Faculties, Schools and Units.

Asked about the relationship between national policies and institutional policies the Deputy Vice Chancellor pointed out that UDW was fortunate to have a Director of QA who is involved in the formulation of national policies in both the SAQA and the HEQC. However, the Deputy Vice Chancellor felt that the

HEQC in its initial audits should start with a development-oriented approach before adopting the `control' or `monitoring' mode.

### 5.3.2 THE QUALITY ASSURANCE OFFICE

As the aim of the study is to get the view of the QA Office the two managers of this office were interviewed together in the Director's Office. The same set of themes used with the Deputy Vice Chancellor were used in this interview:

According to the QA Office, quality is always discipline – or context – bound and therefore it is not always easy to provide a general definition of quality.

While in one context quality may be defined as “value for money” in other context it may be seen as “fitness for purpose”. Accordingly, the UDW QA Office has a very broad of flexible conception of quality. Thus the Office is deliberately adopting what the Director described as a “light touch approach” to quality assurance at UDW. However, the QA office agreed that it sees *quality development* as taking precedence over *quality control* or what may be seen as a form of `policing' by the university community. Moreover, issues such as “staff development”, “quality enhancement” and “accountability” are central to its understanding of quality assurance.

The deputy director pointed out that HEQC policies would push the QA Office towards the “fitness for purpose” understanding of quality and that this would shape the activities of the policies of the university with regard to quality assessment. He went on point out that the university does not have a very clear policy on staff development and on role of the QA Office in this regard. The focus in the activities of the QA office is on evaluation of modules utilizing the

standardized evaluation questionnaire for all modules offered by different Faculties. This is useful as a means of identifying good practice and gaps or weaknesses but nothing is being done with regard to student and staff development. This is a direct consequence of gaps in the university's QA policies. The functions, roles and authority of QA Office with regard to academic development are not clearly spelt out in the current policies. This problem is further compounded by the imminent (1 Jan 2004) merger with the University of Natal. Interestingly, the QA office has been re-named 'the Office of Quality Assurance & Development' and placed under the Deputy Vice-Chancellor in charge of Strategic Planning & Development. Prior to this new arrangement the QA Office was answerable to Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic & Research). The new name is quite significant as it implies that quality assurance is inextricably linked to general academic development. However, the name still has to be given a practical dimension and meaning by means of appropriate policy directives.

It also emerged from the interview that the QA Office does not believe that it has to take over the functions of the now defunct Centre for Academic Development. Both informants emphasized the importance of having a significant role to play in all the committees and structures concerned with academic development.

The QA Office is also in favour of the decentralization of the management functions to the Faculties and Schools so that its role would be to 'provide support' and to 'facilitate' the management of quality assurance systems in Faculties and Schools.

The Office has succeeded in changing the perceptions of the academic staff about its role and responsibilities from one characterized by suspicion and, sometimes, open hostility to one of acceptance and co-operation.

The Office is generally satisfied with the current self-valuation mechanism i.e the questionnaire. Results are given to individual lecturers and not to Deans or School Directors because they are supposed to be `confidential`.

The Office doesn't have a problem with Schools conducting their own internal evaluation mechanisms as long they understand that this forms part of internal review processes. This position was reiterated even more emphatically in an internal e-mail sent to all academic members of staff after the researcher's interview with the QA Office: "It goes without saying that assessments that are not conducted by this office are not legitimate or in any way "substitutes" for the official assessments conducted by this office."

Both the Director and the Deputy Director mentioned that they have done a UNISA certificate programme on Total Quality Management (TQM). This explains their holistic conception of quality assurance and accounts for their decision to call their approach to quality TQM systems.

### 5.3.3 THE DEAN

The only Dean interviewed defined quality as the `production' of `quality products' by which he meant graduates with the requisite knowledge and skills in their chosen professions. He went on to emphasise the role of professional bodies such as the South African Engineering Council and similar bodies in assuring quality and ensuring that professional standards are maintained. He pointed out that those Faculties whose work is monitored on a regular basis by

professional bodies are not averse to being assessed and audited by the HEQC. The reason for this, he argued, would be that these Faculties would be familiar with the requirements of external audits. In addition, the following points emerged in my discussion with the Dean:

- He believes that quality assurance should not be seen as synonymous with academic development as the two are conceptually and structurally distinct. Academic development initiatives should be used to enhance academic quality. Quality assurance, on the other hand, has the responsibility of identifying gaps and shortcomings in the academic programme and assuring that the goals of the university and its various sub-components are attained. If organizational goals are not attained, possible causes should be identified and appropriate remedies suggested. Therefore, the Dean went on to argue, the efficacy of foundation modules and access programmes must also be assessed by the QA Office. Thus, it is misleading to see the two activities (quality assurance and academic development) as synonymous.
- The Dean also pointed out that all the six Deans should, in their capacity as 'programme managers', play a pivotal administrative and managerial role in quality assurance in their respective Faculties. For instance, the results of the questionnaires that are used by the QA Office for module evaluation should be given to the Deans and not to the lecturers offering those particular modules. It is important for the Dean as a 'programme manager' to get a global picture of the quality of modules offered in his/her Faculty.
- According to the Dean, national policies as outlined in the documents issued by the HEQC, provide minimum standards for programmes and qualifications which should be adhered to by all South African Higher Education institutions. Self-evaluation mechanisms such as the module

evaluation questionnaire that is currently in use at UDW should serve the purpose of improving compliance with the minimum standards contained in national policies. Thus quality promotion or enhancement should be an institutional function rather a matter of government policy.

- Academics who comply with the requirements of national policies should not be 'scared of being assessed as they would be confident that they are doing the right thing.'
- External quality audits should be conducted in a diagnostic manner with the aim identifying areas in need of improvement or some form of remedial intervention. Human and material and financial resources can only be used effectively once gaps and weaknesses in the system have been identified.

#### 5.4 DATA REDUCTION AND ANALYSIS

In terms of the themes used to frame the interviews, the following issues and patterns emerged from the interviews with selected informants:

##### 5.4.1 CONCEPTIONS OF QUALITY

The interviews with senior managers revealed that there is no commonly agreed understanding of the concept of quality at UDW. This could be attributed to the inherent elusiveness of the concept of quality or to the failure of university management to provide an operational or practical definition of academic quality that would suit the mission and vision of the institution. It is worth noting, however, that in my interview with the Deputy Vice Chancellor he alluded to the difficulty of defining quality in an organization which seeks to achieve the apparently irreconcilable goals of redress and equity on the one hand, and academic excellence on the other hand. He spoke at length on the

issue of 'poverty' in response to my request for an institutional understanding of 'academic quality'. His awareness of the 'equity and excellence paradox' as he called it, made him shift the interview towards sociological issues such as 'poverty' and what he described as 'the legacy of apartheid'. This 'digression' is particularly significant to the researcher as it shows that the Deputy Vice Chancellor, unlike other informants in this study, was not prepared to be constrained by the assumptions and conventions underpinning 'research interviews'.

Interestingly, the Deputy Vice Chancellor went on to point out that he regards the mission statement as a policy document that has a direct bearing on the issue of academic quality. Implicit in his comments about the mission statement is the view that it could be seen as providing the university's understanding of quality. In line with this view, he believes, rightly or wrongly, that, 'in the first phase of the quality assurance process they [the HEQC] will be judging us [UDW] on the basis of our mission statement.'

It is also worth pointing out that the Deputy Vice Chancellor chose not to simply reproduce definitions of quality as defined in the HEQC's policy documents although he is thoroughly familiar with these. In other words, he did not rely on 'academic discourse' in answering my questions. Instead he focused on what he considers to be the socio-political determinants of academic excellence. One point which emerged with striking clarity from our discussion is his belief that policies should be re-interpreted and perhaps re-configured in the light of particular social and political institutional circumstances. Thus, in his view, the concept of quality in an institution like UDW acquires inescapable socio-political connotations and should not be seen as a neutral descriptive concept.

The response of the QA Office when asked about its understanding of what constitutes quality at UDW was decidedly academic, if not plainly evasive. The informants tended to emphasise the contextual nature of any conception of quality. They pointed out that different disciplines have different conceptions of quality. However, they were frank enough to admit that they think the HEQC will expect them to conform to the 'fitness for purpose' understanding of quality which is prominent in its [the HEQC's] policy documents. While it is valid that quality is not easy to pin down to a particular operational definition, it is equally valid that different institutions have their own criteria for assessing quality based on the university's aims and goals as outlined in its mission statement and strategic plan.

The Dean used a patently commercial metaphor in explaining his understanding of academic quality. For him quality denotes the 'output' or 'product' of the university. The products, of course, are the graduates produced by the university. It could be argued that this is a mechanistic or even technical view of quality, but it is an undeniable fact that most higher education policies in this country, including those of the HEQC, constantly refer to 'productivity'. Thus the Dean's understanding of quality could be said to reflect current discourses in higher education in the national and global arena.

In conclusion it should be pointed out that the Dean's and, to a lesser extent, the DVC's conception of quality presuppose an 'input – output model' in which the 'quality' of the students that you admit to the institution will, in the final analysis, determine the quality of the university's output. The QA Office, on the other hand subscribes to the view that quality is always determined by 'the purposes or goals' of the discipline, School or Faculty. However, it is not clear how these context-specific goals can be translated into common organizational goals.

#### 5.4.2 NATIONAL AND INSTITUTIONAL QUALITY ASSURANCE POLICIES

The comments of all informants on this issue suggest they are all in favour of both external and internal mechanisms of assuring quality. All the four informants regard the initial external audits as aimed at identifying shortcomings in the system which will then be remedied appropriately.

#### 5.4.3 QUALITY ASSURANCE MANAGEMENT AT UDW

As outlined in its position paper, the QA Office at UDW has chosen to adopt TQMS as an underpinning theoretical model for all its policies. Thus in line with the principles of TQM the work of the QA Office is not confined to the assessment of teaching and learning but encompasses management and support services as well. The Director of the QA Office put it succinctly in the interview: 'you cannot really look at the academic part without evaluating the support structures such as student administration.' Significantly, this comment echoed the view expressed by the Deputy Vice Chancellor, 'quality should involve also the management and leadership and how we manage the whole academic endeavour'.

#### 5.4.4 CHANGING THE ATTITUDES OF STAFF TOWARDS QUALITY ASSURANCE

Arguably, the most demanding aspect of the management of quality in a university is the creation of a commonly shared vision about the importance of quality. When this point was raised in interviews all informants pointed out that

they felt they had succeeded in changing the attitudes of academic staff to the assessment of quality. Initially, some members of staff were suspicious or even openly hostile to the QA Office. The subsequent changes in their attitude could be attributed to the information workshops organised and facilitated by the QA Office as well as inviting members of the HEQC to address members of staff and to answer questions and thus allay their fears. Effective communication through regular newsletters, e-mail and the intranet also played a role in creating a collective vision regarding the value and significance of quality assurance. The DVC believes the most effective way of changing attitudes is by formulating clear and unambiguous policies which gradually become embedded in organisational culture.

The Dean was confident about the support of his staff in quality assurance initiatives. He attributed this to the fact lecturers in his Faculty are used to being assessed by a professional body with very stringent standards. It is therefore not surprising that most of the lecturers who volunteered to take part in the pilot trial of the questionnaire came from his Faculty.

## 5.5 DRAWING CONCLUSIONS

In drawing conclusions the most significant point to bear in mind is that the researcher is the main research instrument in this study. Consequently, he is the collaborator in the creation of the 'field texts' as well as the 'research texts'. Consequently, conclusions in a study of this nature take the form of the researcher's own interpretations of the respondents' and informant's views and suggestions. Relying on a critical and analytical approach, these interpretations seek to uncover assumptions underpinning particular comments and views expressed by informants in this study. The general aim of the study as outlined in Chapter 1 is to uncover the different ways of constructing meaning about the implementation of quality assurance at UDW. Most, if not all, the conclusions

listed below are corroborated by the data collected by means of both the questionnaire and the interview:

- Respondents and informants show a marked preference for a balanced system of quality assessment combining internal self-evaluation and external assessment by government agencies.
- The responses of respondents and informants to questions reflect an awareness of the need for South Africa to become globally competitive while paying attention to local needs linked to its peculiar history. This awareness is particularly evident in the views expressed by the informants who participated in the interviews.
- The implementation of quality assurance systems at UDW has reached a fairly advanced stage in terms of policy formulation but nothing much has been done in terms of implementation. The current activities of the QA Office are confined to module evaluation and other administrative tasks. Other core aspects of quality assurance such as curriculum, staff and student development have not been tackled. There is no clear set of guidelines as to how the management and leadership of the various components of the university are to be evaluated. This serious omission in both policy formulation and implementation may be attributed to the lack of stability in senior management structures and the preoccupation with planning for the impending merger with the University of Natal.
- More material and human resources need to be assigned to the function of quality assurance. As one way of dealing with the obvious shortage of resources most respondents and informants felt that the university should de-centralise authority and power to middle and line managers. This would result in the involvement of Deans and School Directors in the formulation and implementation of quality assurance mechanisms and procedures. The majority of respondents and informants believe

that the present highly centralized quality management system at UDW leaves a lot to be desired.

- Fundamental changes need to be made in UDW's organizational culture to ensure that 'quality becomes everybody's business' to quote the phrase used by the Director of the QA Office in our interview. This could be achieved through the creation of a common vision and a shared sense of purpose among the academic staff. The university's QA Office has already begun to lay the foundation for a new organizational culture by basing its quality assurance policies on the theory of Total Quality Management.
- For historical reasons managers at UDW prefer a quality management systems that foregrounds development instead of mere 'evaluation' or 'assessment' of quality. Thus the majority of respondents and informants believe that all members of staff should be empowered to evaluate their own activities as lecturers / teachers, administrators and managers.
- The data collected reveal that Total quality management systems (TQMS) has only been used for rhetorical or symbolic purposes by the QA office as no attempt has been made to implement the underlying principles of this philosophy or theory. While this is an effective and viable conceptual model for the management of quality assurance at UDW it still needs to be given a practical dimension. The efficacy and relevance of quality assurance policies based on theories or models borrowed from the business and industrial sectors still need to be tested empirically.
- The majority of academic managers who participated in this study are in favour of the creation of an institutional quality assurance system that would be in line with national higher education policies. Predictably,

some academics are concerned about what they perceive as government interference in institutional governance and management.

## CHAPTER 6

### FINAL CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### 6.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides a brief synoptic overview of the main conclusions of the study and suggests aspects of quality assurance management which require further investigation. The chapter also includes some recommendations, based on the findings of this study, about quality management structures that would suit the South African higher education system in general and the University of Durban-Westville in particular.

#### 6.2 SUMMARY OF THE RESEARCH

The study looks at higher education policy with particular reference to the quality assurance policies. The main assumption, which provides the starting

point for the study, is that quality assurance in its various ramifications is a direct consequence of the corporate enterprise ideology which is increasingly becoming a standard feature of higher education systems all over the world. The underlying principles of this ideology and their implications for the management of higher education institutions are discussed briefly in Chapter 1, and the practical manifestations of the corporate ethos are examined closely in Chapter 2.

Like similar studies cited in Chapters 1 and 2, this exploratory investigation has shown universities all over the world are expected to be accountable to various stakeholders who often have conflicting interests and motivations. These stakeholders include government, employers, industry and commerce, communities, students, academics and the professions.

The empirical component of the study examined the attitudes and perceptions of senior and middle managers towards national and institutional quality assurance policies. Relying on the questionnaire and a semi-structured interview guide, the empirical study further examined the extent to which UDW has succeeded to implement government policies and to develop its own institutional quality assurance mechanisms and procedures.

One of the main findings of this study is that academics in key management positions at UDW have mixed feelings about the issue of accountability as required by government policies: they wish to retain their 'academic freedom' and 'autonomy', but they are not opposed to the idea of being evaluated by government agencies if this will lead to the preservation and improvement of 'standards'. However, as shown in the previous chapter (par 5.2.1 Table5.1), the majority of academics who participated in this study see institutional self-evaluation as taking precedence over government-initiated quality audits.

As far as models of quality management are concerned, the general feeling among respondents and informants is that this should involve managers at all levels. There is a preference for a decentralized system of quality assurance management instead of a centralized one in which lecturers (the key implementers of quality assurance mechanisms) feel excluded.

The study also found that senior managers are of the view that quality should be conceptualized and defined in way that takes into account the peculiar history, culture and needs of UDW as an organization. Definitions of quality cannot be imposed on higher education institutions by the government. In the case of UDW, the issue of quality cannot be seen in isolation from the broader issue of academic development, especially that aspect of the latter which seeks to facilitate the success of under-prepared students in their studies.

The literature review (Chapter 2) examined various conceptions of quality within the context of tertiary education. As shown in Chapters 1 and 2, the issue of quality in higher education has two closely intertwined yet distinguishable aspects, namely, monitoring and control by government agencies such as the HEQC in the South African context, and improvement of the core academic activities by the higher education institutions themselves. In the South African context, the HEQC has been given the task of monitoring and evaluating quality in terms of clearly defined performance indicators. Interestingly, the HEQC sees its task, at least during this initial phase, as combining both the control and improvement dimensions of quality management (HEQC,2002(a):6).

South African Universities, especially those faced with the challenge of self-renewal and development, have their own strategies of ensuring that their various activities contribute to the attainment of goals as set out in their missions

and strategic plans. This study has shown that external assessments carried out by government agencies are not always in line with the aims and objectives of institutional development initiatives (Chapter 5 par 5.2.4). There are always discrepancies between institutional self-evaluation mechanisms and external quality audits (Chapter 2 par 2.4). The former is often based on immediate pragmatic considerations such as curriculum design, staff and student development while the latter is invariably concerned with issues of efficiency and cost-effectiveness. By definition, the concept of audits implies a rather mechanistic and fairly rigid approach to quality. However, as noted earlier, the HEQC promises to do things differently (See Chapter 2 par 2.7.2).

As shown in the critical survey of global trends (Chapter 2 par 2.2 ) the tension between the politically and economically driven need for 'efficiency' and a quality education is not confined to South Africa. It is a feature of European, British and American higher education systems as well. One of the central arguments of this study is that the South African government's preoccupation with evaluation (cf. the idea of the "evaluative state" in Chapter 2) may lead to increased 'efficiency' in terms of increased throughput rates in South African universities, this does not, however, necessarily translate into quality. Educational quality, as shown in the discussion of global trends in Chapter 2 par 2.6 , is essentially about **process** rather than **product**. Unfortunately, knowledge and value acquisition do not lend themselves to easy quantification. Thus a quality assurance system which does not see the continued development of people, structures and processes as its central function is in danger of becoming instrumentalist and perfunctory.

As this study has demonstrated, some academic managers at UDW subscribe to the largely unexamined view that the standardisation of academic programmes nationally is an inherently positive phenomenon. They wish to be assessed

against, and compared to, other universities that have a reputation of being centres of excellence. (Chapter 5 par 5.2.4). They tend to overlook the obvious fact that universities have different needs and priorities. These needs are often a direct consequence of the social environments to which they need to respond. Awareness of local needs and priorities was evident in all the interviews conducted with key informants.

Perhaps the most significant conclusion of this short investigation is that the implementation of quality assurance is largely dependent on the creation of an appropriate organisational culture. The total quality management systems (TQMS) approach (see Chapter 3, par3.7) is more than just a structural change in management philosophy, but is a significant change in the outlook and values of the academic community at UDW. As mentioned in Chapter 5 (par 5.5), the TQMS approach is equally effective at both symbolic or cultural and practical levels (see Morgan C & Murgatroyd S, 1994:94-120; Cornesky, R , McCool,S, Byrnes, L & Weber R, 1992:55-75).

The idea of basing the management of quality on TQM at UDW is thus a wise and pragmatic decision as this will facilitate the transformation of organisational culture which, in turn, will ensure a smooth policy implementation process. Policy implementation depends on the attitudes of individuals towards the new policy (in this case managers and their subordinates). Both the aims and findings of this study confirm the view that:

Organizations don't innovate or implement change, individuals do. Individuals are responsible for carrying out a policy act not only from institutional incentives, but also from professional and personal motivation. (McLaughlin, 1987:174)

This study has shown that individual academics in management positions have varying interpretations of national and institutional quality assurance policies. All the four informants interviewed for this study agreed that it is the task of the QA Office and senior management at UDW to create a commonly shared vision of quality and to suggest practical ways in which it could be attained and constantly improved upon.

### 6.3 RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study as outlined in the previous chapter suggest that the management of quality assurance at UDW should be responsibility of senior management with the Deputy-Vice Chancellor for Strategic Planning & Development taking direct responsibility for the evaluation and development of quality in the university as a whole. It may be a bit ambitious, though understandable, for the QA Office at UDW to adopt an all-inclusive approach to quality assurance in line with the principles of Total Quality Management. Like the HEQC, the QA Office must focus on teaching and learning and only look at issues relating to management and facilities management if these have a direct bearing on teaching and learning. The Director of the QA Office must be answerable to the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Strategic Planning & Development).

The function of assuring and enhancing quality should be carried out by the Deans and School Directors as middle managers in charge of Faculties and Schools respectively. Each Faculty or School should have the freedom to modify the university-wide quality assurance policies and procedures to suit its peculiar goals, needs and circumstances. In other words, all managers including Discipline Chairs and Programme Co-ordinators should be given some leeway and authority to interpret and apply quality assurance principles in a manner

that would be meaningful and productive in their particular contexts. This is at the core of decentralization of power and authority.

Each lecturer responsible for teaching a particular module or administering a particular programme should be empowered with the requisite knowledge and skills to evaluate his or her own performance and that of his or her colleagues in terms of commonly agreed mechanisms and criteria. This mode of self - and peer evaluation could be complemented by means of Faculty-wide or School-wide module / programme evaluation which would reflect the goals and objectives of the University as a whole.

However, this decentralized system of quality management requires some measure of central control and monitoring. This central leadership role could be played by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor in conjunction with the QA Office. The University's mission statement and strategic plan should provide a clear sense of direction for senior management as to how to proceed in this regard. Finally, the importance of creating and sustaining an enabling organizational culture to facilitate quality assurance and quality promotion cannot be over-emphasised.

The above recommendations flow from the findings outlined and discussed in the previous chapter.

#### 6.4 GUIDELINES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Because of the limited scope of this study, some aspects of quality assurance could not be tackled comprehensively. Below is a list of issues which require further exploration:

- The extent to which quality assurance in higher education is linked to globalisation and the consequent internationalisation of higher education.
- The link between quality assurance and the increasing adoption of the corporate ethos in higher education systems.
- Future researchers may also wish to examine the relationship between the quality of teaching and learning on the one hand, and the lecturer's professional training in education on the other hand.

All these issues are raised in this study but only dealt with rather superficially due to thematic and structural constraints.

## 6.5 CONCLUSION

In conclusion and in fairness to the HEQC, it must be pointed out that it is still too early to offer any firm and conclusive judgments on quality assurance in the South African higher education system. Thus the conclusions of studies such as this one may have to be reconsidered as policies, most of which are currently in draft form, are finalized and implemented nationally.

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