

Abstract

Purpose

This article aims to identify what is needed to enhance academic quality assurance in a university, with specific efforts to reduce the risks associated with ritualised quality assurance practices.

Design/methodology/approach

The aspects to enhance academic quality assurance efforts in managerial universities are identified through a thematic analysis of the literature.

Findings

It was found that the very nature of managerialism caused quality assurance effort to lose its meaning and become a ritual for compliance only. Subsequently, five aspects were identified to enhance academic quality assurance in a university. Establishing quality assurance in the unique context of the institution; ensuring that the efforts of policy makers are aligned with those of policy users; quality assurance based on sound auditing principles without excessively monitoring performance; building a quality culture where quality assurance is practiced in an enabling environment; and allowing quality assurance practices to be adaptable.

Practical implications

The aspects identified are particularly important for quality assurance practitioners, developers of quality assurance processes and academics at universities to enable enhancement of academic quality assurance practices.

Originality/value

This article argued that the nature of managerialism caused quality assurance to lose its meaning. The abundance of quality assurance tasks, forms and processes do not protect the institution against reputational risks, and quality assurance, as practiced today, was found to be intrinsically risky. This article offered an integrated view on how quality assurance efforts can be enhanced.

Keywords: Academic management, quality assurance, risk management, managerialism, universities

Introduction

Prospective students, employers, faculty members and governments rely on university rankings to make important decisions. A number of university ranking methodologies exist. These methodologies include a number of measures, such as citations of published university research, teaching quality, student employability and staff–student ratio. Common to these university ranking indicators is the measurement of quality, whether quality of teaching, quality of research or quality of programs offered. Given the increasing repute of these university rankings, one can accept that the survival of universities is largely dependent on the quality of their offerings. Quality assurance is offered as central to achieving success as a university. Despite the clearly articulated quality assurance and management strategies, universities have been exposed to, and

suffered as a result of, risks associated with their offerings, research outputs and position in society. Unfortunately, there is no shortage of stories about universities where “the risk cat has escaped the management bag” (McWilliam, 2007:312).

The interest in writing this article arose out of the author’s interest in the exposure to institutional reputational risk despite a legion of quality assurance tasks, processes and procedures. One cannot ignore the voices claiming that quality assurance is a chore and an imposition (Middlehurst, 1997:190) and a regulatory tool (Jarvis, 2014:155) which infringes on academic freedom and encourages mistrust. The author speculates that the abundance of quality assurance tasks, forms and processes and the way these are deployed in institutions are inherently risky. Or simply put, the quality assurance practices may put the academic offering and the reputation of the entire institution at risk by using a compliance regime that undervalues academic judgement and instead invests in hyper-rational systems of audit (McWilliam *et al.*, 2006:223), strengthened by managerial efforts towards efficiency.

This article sets out to describe the risks of quality assurance in the managerial university and to identify aspects that enhance academic management. These aspects were identified through a thematic analysis of the body of knowledge on quality assurance in higher education spanning over the previous 20 years. Although the list of publications identified is extensive, the author cannot claim that it is exhaustive. The first order analysis was a process of sensemaking and entailed a set of preliminary jottings (Saldaña, 2011). These jottings were not accurate or final but represented ideas for analytic consideration. This process

was followed by second-order coding where the author then identified patterns or themes through which to describe the aspects that enhance quality assurance practices.

This article aims to answer the question, from a theoretical perspective, regarding that which is needed to enhance academic quality assurance in a university, with specific focus on reducing the risks associated with ritualised quality assurance practices.

Following this introduction, an overview of managerialism and the way it influences the lived experiences of academics is presented. This is followed by a description of how quality assurance is perceived by academics within the broader context of managerialism as reported in the literature, grounded in institutional praxis and contexts on which this article reports. Next, the aspects to enhance the academic quality assurance effort based on an integrative review of existing literature are presented, based on the results of a thematic analysis of the research topics and findings, which comprised literature on quality assurance in higher education. The final part of this article calls for further research, specifically research in practice.

Although this article offers an integrative review of the literature, the context within which the author operates had a bearing on the interpretation of the literature and the identification of the themes. As such, some background on the author and her organisational context is included. The author is an academic manager in the largest open and distance learning university on the African continent. While fulfilling management tasks, the author remains a practicing academic who

implements the decisions and strategies devised by those responsible for academic quality assurance in the university. The author is also an active member of the College Quality Assurance Committee, and realised early on in her career that quality assurance tended to be a process of box ticking and complying with the demands of a highly governed academic portfolio.

Managerialism in universities

One cannot consider the contemporary academic management environment without taking note of the managerial movement in institutions of learning. Managerialism in universities is well documented in the literature (Deem 2004, Deem and Brehony 2005; Meek, Goedegebuure, Santiago and Carvalho, 2010). Managerialism is offered as an ideological approach to ensure that universities become more responsive and fulfilling a greater range of needs more efficiently than has been the case previously. Managerialism refers to a set of management processes and instruments aimed at enhancing efficiency through control (Deetz, 1992:222). Through a thematic search of the literature on managerialism in universities in the literature, Davis *et al.* (2014:3) found evidence of a substantial drive towards teaching and research quality inspection, performance indicators and target setting, and significant accountability of academics to their paymasters. Quality assurance is thus firmly part of the academic undertaking and cannot be considered outside of the managerial tendencies in universities.

Although these managerial practices are considered useful, there is also evidence of detrimental effects on primary tasks of universities. Henkel (2004)

argues that previously taken-for-granted academic ideologies now compete with those of managerialism and neo-liberalism in the university as a corporate enterprise. Lapsley (2009:1) went so far as to refer to managerialism as “the cruellest invention of the human spirit”. In terms of the quality of the offerings in universities, Bryson (2004), Davies and Thomas (2002), Thornhill *et al.* (1996) and Trow (1994) shared their concerns about the influence of managerial practices on quality assurance. In fact, already as early as 1994, Trow claimed that university employees no longer enjoyed any part of the job, because the increased business-oriented administrative tasks and assessments had caused them to spend an increasing amount of time on such secondary activities (Trow, 1994:11).

Academic resistance to managerialism in Australian universities was referred to as the presence of a ‘more muscular management style’ and increased concern with issues of efficiency and economy (Anderson, 2008:251). In many cases, the apparent ‘forceful introduction’ and implementation of performance management systems in universities across the world have disrupted academic life (Kallio *et al.*, 2016:685). With the focus on performance management, those who do academic work are now directed to pursue goals that are rewarded by performance management measures and metrics, even if the scholars themselves do not agree with the rationale and usefulness of these indicators (Kallio *et al.*, 2016:704).

Managerial influences on the experiences of academics

The effects of the managerial movement are manifest across universities. For this article, the influence of managerialism on the academic staff member was considered. Academics are key stakeholders in any university and critical to any academic quality assurance effort. Changes to the roles and experiences of academics affect how quality assurance is considered and practiced. Clancy (2007) found that the weight and complexity of the academic workload had increased due to power sharing and centralisation of power. Further, decision-making took place through a system of portfolio committees and sub-committees (Shattock, 2004) and there was an increase in reporting for governance. Collegiality, or social capital, facilitates coordination and cooperation and encourages the emergence of social trust (Dill, 1995:103). Yet, the over-regulation of universities smothers the human spirit, and was embodied by the decline in academics' critical and investigative inclination (Wessels, 2015:14). Managerialism eroded collegiality through its profit-driven motives that altered the institutional culture (Weinberg and Graham-Smith, 2012). It is reasonable to conclude that the combination of the influence of managerialism and the perceptions of quality assurance leads to quality assurance mechanisms that seek to manage, steer and control the work of academics in ways that serve the interests of management by applying motives related to efficiency, value, performance and thus economic worth (Rosa *et al.*, 2007:1). Ultimately, these added complexities have affected the working conditions and lived experiences of academics making it more difficult for them to respond constructively to the quality agenda.

The risks of quality assurance

It is also reasonable to conclude that the very nature of managerialism caused quality assurance to lose its meaning and to become a ritual for compliance only. This view was supported in the literature. Critique of, and dissatisfaction with, quality assurance schemes were confirmed by Houston and Paewai (2013). Smeenk *et al.*, (2009) argued that managerialism worked against its own intentions of efficient and effective quality management. Hoecht (2006:541) reviewed the quality control systems in higher education in the United Kingdom, and confirmed that in the early 1990s, there had been a change from an informal 'light-touch' quality control system, based on local practices and a significant amount of trust and professional autonomy, to a highly prescribed process of audit-based quality control currently. Often, the audit format of quality assurance brought rituals of verification instead of fostering trust, which may be detrimental to innovative teaching and learning. Wolf (2005:13) referred to meaningless form filling required to report to external quality assurance bodies. Specifically, Wolf (2005:13) equated quality assurance with a 'defensive exercise in providing, on paper, every assurance and statistic and policy declaration that could possibly be imagined'. Houston and Paewai (2013:262) referred to quality assurance in higher education as a 'wicked problem' with no solution. Newton (2000) found that the most basic source of anxiety among academics was that internal and external quality systems and quality monitoring were managerial tools that threatened academic or professional autonomy (Newton, 2000). It was not surprising that, for some academics, quality assurance processes have been seen as a burdensome extra to be responded to through formulaic compliance

(Harvey and Williams, 2010). Newton (2000:153) found that some academics perceived quality assurance tasks as a beast-like presence that required feeding with ritualistic practices to meet accountability requirements. Anderson (2006) found that academics, although committed to quality in research and teaching, continued to resist quality assurance processes within their universities because they were often uninvolved in their design (Houston and Paewai, 2013:261).

As alluded to in the introduction, despite the clearly articulated quality assurance and management strategies, institutions are exposed to, and suffer from, risks associated with their offerings. Maintaining position in the market is at risk when public accusations are made of scandalous or suspect conduct. Against this backdrop, the question is posed whether the abundance of quality assurance tasks, forms and processes protect the institution against reputational risks, or rather, whether quality assurance, as practiced today, is intrinsically risky. If one accepts the risks inherent in the actual quality assurance praxis, then a consideration of how risks are managed within universities is warranted. Lapsley (2009) confirmed that risk management was a managerial practice adopted by universities. Wessels (2015) warns that risk management in higher education was often over-regulative. Coupling the over-regulative nature of risk management with the over-regulation of quality assurance, one might agree with Wessels that the human spirit of the academic is smothered. Gunter (2008) and Stevenson (2007) claimed that the neat, tidy and logical processes of managerialism control and eliminate human judgement and, thereby, enhanced the need for management of risk. Raban and Turner (2006) reassured the sceptic

that the application of risk management principles to academic quality assurance was not just another management fad.

As with the practice of quality assurance, the practice of risk management in universities also brings its own challenges. For the most part, the management of risk in universities is accompanied by increased internal auditing and calls for accountability. Newton (2000:153) pointed to the danger that quality may be forced on academic staff for accountability purposes, rather than being premised on the activities and priorities of staff. Viewing quality assurance and accountability as a chore and an imposition, as many academics have done, rather than as a feature of good practice and a manifestation of professional pride, has had detrimental effects on the public image of the whole quality assurance community and its perceived professionalism (Middlehurst, 1997:190). McWilliam *et al.* (2006:209) claimed that risk consciousness brings its own risks – in particular, the potential transformation of a culture based on intellect into a culture based on compliance.

The managerial conception of accountability is coercive and authoritarian and it reduces professional relations to crude, quantifiable and inspectable templates (Shore and Wright, 2000). Further, the audit culture, linked to managerial processes, derived its legitimacy from its claims to enhance transparency and accountability (Shore, 2008). Amongst others, audits, performance indicators, management by targets and periodic teaching quality reviews have been used as instruments to spread managerialism into the governance of universities. With

this movement, Shore (2008:282) explained that the audit culture has also promoted the rise of a regime of bureaucrats, inspectors, commissioners, regulators and experts, which, according to Cooper (2001), is eroding professional autonomy and threatening democratic freedom. According to Power (1997), the audit culture was characterised by a compliance, or 'tick box', society. Further, compliance with the requirements of quality assurance has been assured coercively using the threat of changes to the funding and reputation of the provider (Houston and Paewai, 2013:274).

It is within this context of the rise of managerialism in universities, its influence on academics, and the way quality assurance is perceived, that the study on which this article reports aimed to identify opportunities to enhance academic quality assurance. As stated earlier, the study aimed to answer, from a theoretical perspective, the question related to that which is needed to enhance the academic quality assurance efforts in a university, with specific efforts to reduce the risks associated with quality assurance practices.

4. Aspects to enhance academic quality assurance efforts

Higher education has been facing turbulent times and there is agreement on the need for a 'different kind of quality assurance' (Uvalic-Trumbic, 2015 in Marklein, 2015). The following section presents the aspects, based on the results of a review of the research topics and findings from literature on educational leadership and management, to enhance academic quality assurance efforts

within the framework reducing the risks associated with quality assurance practices.

The aspects identified may stimulate further debate to describe a different kind of quality assurance that may be suitable within the managerial movement in universities and, in doing so, reduce the identified risks of the current perceptions and reported practices of quality assurance.

CONTEXTUAL ASPECT: The quality assurance system needs to be established in the unique context of the institution

In changing or re-shaping quality policy, it is advisable to take full account of the constraints and circumstances of the situation and context, which influence both policy implementation and the activities of key actors or system users (Newton, 2002). More attention needs to be focused on the importance of the conditions and context of academics' work, recognising the influence of the managerial movement on the lived experiences of academics. If this is not the case, quality monitoring is liable to remain mere compliance and box ticking. Newton (2002:207) notes that there is a difference between the planned outcomes of policy and those which emerge through implementation. This means that quality policy is changed in the implementation process and any quality management system will always be affected by situatedness. Academic managers responsible for quality assurance should guard against misalignment between the reality of the context and the philosophy or quality culture underpinning a quality system and the technology of the quality system itself. By considering alignment with prevailing circumstances, it is possible to ascertain which outcomes are most likely from which combination of external and internal constraining forces and

opportunities, and which approach to quality management and leadership might be most appropriate (Newton, 2002). Quality assurance tasks, processes and practices need to be aligned to the context within which deployment is to take place. Newton (2002) argues that, if academics are to remain pivotal in efforts to improve the quality of teaching and learning, then institutions and external quality bodies need to focus more attention on the importance of the conditions and context of academics' work.

ALIGNMENT ASPECT: Efforts of policy makers should be aligned to policy users. Quality assurance practices should not be deployed using a top-down managerial approach. For quality assurance to be successful, it needs to tap into the inner workings of universities to penetrate the discourses and activities of academics at all levels. If this is not done, Houston and Paewai (2013) confirmed that quality assurance systems will be unable to contribute to the improvement of teaching and research in a university. Policy makers need to pay close attention to the preoccupations and predispositions of university staff when quality assurance tasks, processes and procedures are planned (Newton, 2002).

There is strong agreement that, if academic decisions continue to be made by academics, academic focus and priority are maintained (Kok *et al.* 2010). This view is not new; the 'real makers of policy' are policy users (Newton, 2002:49) – this refers to the 'silo effect', indicating that separate offices responsible for policy making need to be within the user environment. Lokuwaduge and Armstrong (2014:11) argued that management should understand their stakeholders' environments, and should manage more effectively within the terms of the

relationships that exists, such as autonomy and academic freedom. Practitioners are not passive recipients of management objectives. There is, therefore, a need for quality managers and academic administrators to take account of what academics think and do, and which meanings they attach to the different facets of policy and how they work, change or even 'work around' policy (Trowler, 1998). Further, bottom-up perspectives should inform quality assurance so that the quality managers and academic departments are equally accountable to one another with the aim of negotiating shared objectives and priorities (Raban and Turner, 2006). Quality assurance tasks, processes and practices should intentionally be personal. Auditing practices are recognised to be depersonalising, and quality assurance practices should guard against this, especially in university environments that are known for bureaucratic barriers. There needs to be buy-in from the users, specifically the academics. It is beyond doubt that academics are active and not passive participants in the quality policy process. Fourie and Alt (2000) claim that quality-related activities could be perceived as eroding the valuable time available for what academics regard as their core activities. In fact, Murphy (2013) purported that the miasma of policies and procedures had crippled universities, and academics spent less and less time on their core functions, namely teaching and research.

Quality officers are members of staff or external quality monitoring bodies tasked with the monitoring of quality. These quality officers need to work with academic staff and be accepted by academics, rather than being viewed by academics with suspicion because quality officers are monitoring their work. Quality officers must

also have, and be seen to have, a good knowledge and understanding of the nature of academic work. They must be independent of the university's management structure in the sense that their advice and work generally must be based on academic criteria only and must not use management issues, such as finance, as the starting point (Hodgson and Whalley, 2006:511).

PRINCIPLE ASPECT: The quality assurance system should be grounded in sound auditing principles

Developers of quality assurance processes need to be wary of too much audit. The increasing use of audits arises largely because of growing concerns about quality assurance, operational risk and the crisis of trust, which is said to afflict most professions (Shore, 2008). Auditing may not solve the problem of personal trust in a complex society, but it can provide a temporary sense of certainty. Auditing principles should be seen on a continuum with quality compliance (assurance) at one end and enquiry to inform quality enhancement at the other (Jackson, 1996:45). Lokuwaduge and Armstrong (2014) analysed the effect of the governance structures on performance in government-funded universities following the introduction of the Australian National Governance Protocols in 2004. Their findings suggested that excessive monitoring by board committees negatively influenced teaching quality.

CULTURE ASPECT: Quality assurance should be part of a quality culture and enabling environment

Enabling environments allow academics to break out of the teaching isolation and advance beyond reflective practice to the exploitation of the dialogue. Typically, quality assurance is best practiced in an environment of mutual trust and respect

that allows stakeholders to discuss quality matters in greater detail than they might through casual conversations. Dill (1995) explained the need to identify networks and integrating mechanisms to foster collegiality in the sense of increased academic cohesion, communication and integration. Closely aligned to the enabling environment is the culture of the organisation. Quality assurance within a quality culture is a better approach to quality than a system merely being obeyed (Sârbu *et al.*, 2009:391). A strong quality culture does not rely on a system; rather, it relies on mutual trust among all partners in the educational act. When quality forms part of the culture, quality is no longer something to be implemented, but rather something that is built step by step, action by action, until it becomes a reality. What is necessary too is that the culture of quality has to be both shared and owned by all concerned, with all efforts focused on planned outcomes. It is the proactive, conscientious and well-trained workforce of different cadres, working together willingly and purposefully, for a common goal that establishes a culture of quality (Koul, 2006). Successful quality assurance and enhanced academic management require a high level of trust within an institution, and Nahapiet and Ghoshal (2000) suggest that where a high level of trust is present, people will be more willing to take risks and experiment, increasing the organisation's capacity for dealing with complexity and diversity. Dill (1995:105) took this even further and explained that, in addition to developing academic cohesion within institutions, properly constructed quality assurance systems can also increase the stock of social capital between institutions of higher education.

ADAPTABLE ASPECT: Quality assurance is not a 'one-size-fits-all', but is adaptable

This aspect refers to quality assurance practice rather than to the quality standards. Universities are operating in changing environments, and, to have real quality assurance in universities, quality assurance systems and practices need to be adapted and improved constantly. It is important to provide for feedback based on the satisfaction of clients and other interested parties, with the intention of attaining performance and excellence (Sârbu *et al.*, 2009:383). As technologies change and communication tools become more sophisticated, new additions and modifications to existing processes and systems are required. Testing of new applications, changes to organisational structures and upgrading the qualifications and expertise of both academic and general staff have become essential mechanisms to maintain quality service provision and maintain high standards (Smith, 2006:174).

Calls for further research

The study on which this article reports, set out to describe the risks inherent in the ways quality assurance has been practiced in universities to date and aimed to identify aspects that counter these risks and enhance academic quality assurance. The article offered an integrated review from the perspective of the academics and calls for research based on the perspectives of other stakeholders, for example more research from the perspective of the quality managers and those tasked with developing quality assurance systems. Further, empirical work measuring the effect of quality assurance procedures can also add to the understanding of quality management.

The study reported here considered quality assurance in terms of tuition and learning only. However, the managerial move in universities also affects the other core functions of universities, namely research and the production of new knowledge as well as community service. This opens up research opportunities to explore the influence of managerialism in a wider context. Another possible research endeavour may be the encouragement of greater debate between higher education policy makers and academics on how to achieve quality in higher education teaching and learning while maintaining trust and professional autonomy and building social capital. This calls for research on how to maintain both the trust of the public in the quality of university teaching and the perception of academics of being trusted and of having their professional autonomy preserved or reinstated. Finally, the author specifically calls for research on practice to gain insights drawn from day-to-day life in universities, which may inform the practice and performance of quality managers and quality practitioners.

Conclusion

Managerialism in universities influences how quality assurance is perceived by academics and how quality assurance is practiced. The abundance of quality assurance tasks, forms and processes causes quality assurance to lose meaning and become rituals to 'feed the beast' – to use Newton's (2000) analogy – in order to meet accountability requirements. The natural consequence of the current quality assurance practices, and how they are perceived, is to the detriment of the university and its offerings. Yet, it is likely that more compliance to impersonal

systems may be demanded, with greater penalties for failure to comply. To counter the risks inherent in the quality assurance effort, the study on which this article is based, identified aspects to enhance the academic quality assurance effort in the managerial university. The five aspects to enhance academic quality assurance efforts are, firstly, that quality assurance systems ought to be established in the unique context of the institution. Secondly, quality assurance policy makers ought to align their efforts to those of the policy users and to ensure buy-in from academics. Thirdly, the quality assurance system ought to be grounded in sound auditing principles but should not monitor performance excessively. Fourthly, quality assurance should form part of an enabling and supportive environment and a quality culture. Finally, quality assurance can never be a one-size-fits-all approach.

Managerialism has been widely considered a useful ideology to manage universities. Despite offering promises of efficiency, managerialism has also had negative influences on a number of university processes and practices. The study reported here confirmed, through an integrated review of the literature, the negative influence of the managerial movement on quality assurance practices. Yet, the quality assurance effort is not lost; it is widely recognised as a requirement for enhancing university reputation and thereby adding to the likelihood of institutional survival. Through deliberate consideration of the identified aspects, policy makers and policy users could enhance the quality assurance effort and the way it is perceived. In closing, and in agreement with Dill (1995), enhanced quality assurance practices require a 're-weaving of the collegial fabric' of academic communities, the collective mechanisms by which

faculty members control and improved the quality of academic programmes and research.

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