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ABSTRACT

This article examines key concepts in quality assurance and accreditation, and then compares the situation in the United States of America (US), the United Kingdom (UK) and South Africa, with a view to understanding the implications for open distance learning (ODL). The concepts to be discussed are: quality assurance, accreditation, quality assessment, quality audit, quality control and quality management system, on the one hand, and accountability and improvement, on the other. The Distance Education and Training Council in Washington DC and the Middle States Accrediting Agency form the basis for the US discussion and the Quality Assurance Agency is centres to the UK discussion. In the South African context, the article discusses the criteria of the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) of the Council on Higher Education and those of the National Association of Distance Education and Open Learning Organisations in South Africa (Nadeosa). The experience of the University of South Africa (Unisa) in obtaining accreditation in 2002 from the Distance Education and Training Council (DETC) in Washington DC will give substance to some of the discussion.

Introduction

What are the key concepts in the field of quality assurance and accreditation and how can a common understanding of these concepts be established? For instance, *quality assurance* and *accreditation* are not mutually inclusive terms, and nor are *quality as-*

assurance and *quality assessment*. For years, in Britain, there were separate *quality assurance* and *quality audit* mechanisms; these have now come together in the non-governmental Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), but *accreditation* has not been a feature of either the old processes or the new process. In fact, there has been a great deal of resistance to *quality assessment* as a process external to the educational environment. In the United States of America however, *quality assurance*, *assessment* and *accreditation* have been linked together for a number of years.

Various terms are linked with quality: *control*, *assurance*, *management* and *audit*. Middelhurst (1992) provides clear definitions of the concepts of *quality control*, *assurance* and *assessment*. She places the responsibility for *quality control* on academics. It is their professional responsibility to use methods and to design activities that lead to quality outcomes; for example, according to Middelhurst, academics' knowledge, enthusiasm, use of appropriate media, monitoring of student progress, planning and instructional design all work together to build in quality controls. She sees *quality assurance* as a management responsibility. The institution's management should put in place mechanisms and standard procedures to ensure that quality control is working. This definition is clearer than that of the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) (1998) which states that *quality assurance* 'means the process of ensuring that the degree of excellence specified is achieved.' It is also not clear what point there is in separating *quality management system* from *quality assurance* as SAQA does, since the definitions seem to refer to the same function. This can be seen from SAQA's definition of *quality management system* as 'the combination of processes used to ensure that the degree of excellence specified is achieved'. Middlehurst's interpretation of quality assurance is essentially the same as Harman's (1998, 346): 'quality assurance refers to systematic management and assessment procedures adopted to ensure achievement of specific quality or improved quality, and to enable key stakeholders to have confidence in the management of quality and the outcomes achieved'.

Middlehurst (1992, 28–29) defines *quality assessment* as 'judgment of performance and outcomes against certain criteria or objectives, in order to establish whether the required standard has been achieved, and if failures or shortfalls occur, to ensure that they are corrected', that is, an external agency checks if the institution meets the predetermined outcomes or standards. These standards are usually developed by member organisations and are regularly revised.

SAQA (1998) defines a *quality audit* as 'the process of examining the indicators which show the degree of excellence achieved'. Basically, an audit checks that internal control and assurance systems are in place. It should ensure that an institution conducts regular institutional research based on relevant data collection, and that it bases its strategic planning and management decisions on information obtained from such research. Alderman (1996, 185) comments: 'Audit is a powerful instrument of change, but it is not a measure of quality. It does not, for example, compare standards of degrees, or make judgments as to the quality of teaching.' In South Africa a standing committee of the Council on Higher Education (CHE), the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC), is responsible for conducting institutional audits and accrediting programmes. The CHE/HEQC started with quality audits of entire institutions, both private and

public, in 2005. In institutions that had not previously focused on internal quality control and assurance, this obviously resulted in the transformation of their systems.

The other main concept that is discussed in this article is *accreditation*. According to SAQA (1998),

‘accreditation’ means the certification, usually for a particular period of time, of a person, a body or an institution as having the capacity to fulfill a particular function in the quality assurance system set up by the South African Qualifications Authority in terms of the Act and ‘Education and Training Quality Assurance Body’ means a body accredited in terms of section 5(1)(a)(ii) of the Act, responsible for monitoring and auditing achievements in terms of national standards or qualifications, and to which specific functions relating to the monitoring and auditing of national standards or qualifications have been assigned in terms of section 5(1)(b)(i) of the Act.

This definition emphasises compliance with the law, government regulation and bureaucracy. The CHE/HEQC (2002, 9) gives a clearer definition:

Accreditation signals that programmes that lead to registered qualifications achieve set standards, conduct their activities with integrity, deliver outcomes that justify public confidence and demonstrate accountability for the effective use of public or private funds. It allows government to invest public funds with confidence in programmes that demonstrate their ability to pass through a process of rigorous external scrutiny.

The Distance Education and Training Council (DETC) (2002, 3) in Washington DC, a non-governmental membership organisation, defines *accreditation* as

certification by a recognized body that an institution has voluntarily undergone a comprehensive study and examination, which has demonstrated that the institution does in fact perform the functions that it claims: that the institution has set educational goals for students who enroll, and furnishes materials and services that enable students to meet these stated goals.

The Middle States Commission on Higher Education (2002a, iv), a voluntary, non-governmental, membership organization (one of eight such commissions in the US) places the emphasis on quality as the basis of accreditation and accountability:

Accreditation is the means of self-regulation and peer review adopted by the education community. The accrediting process is intended to strengthen and sustain the quality and integrity of higher education, making it worthy of public confidence and minimizing the scope of external control. The extent to which each educational institution accepts and fulfills the responsibilities inherent in the process is a measure of its concern for freedom and quality in higher education and its commitment to striving for and achieving excellence in its endeavors.

The CHE/HEQC accredits programmes on an ongoing basis by using trained peer evaluators. Re-accrediting every existing programme is not feasible, so the CHE/HEQC has undertaken accreditation of certain qualifications or fields. For instance, this body started with the Master of Business Administration (MBA) review and, in 2005, was busy with a review of teacher education qualifications.

This discussion of key concepts would not be complete without reference to two concepts that are relevant to the underlying rationale for accreditation: *accountability* and *improvement*. Higher education is a costly enterprise to the nation, and to parents and students. It is a decisive factor in the economic success of a nation, which means that graduates and employers, as well as the state, become stakeholders. Higher edu-

education has a social impact and improves graduates' quality of life, which means that each individual is involved. However, accountability should not deteriorate into control that completely undermines the autonomy of the institution; nor should it be the only consideration. Institutions will have to balance accountability and autonomy; the more responsibly institutions act to control and manage quality internally, the more likely they are to be granted self-accreditation status. The improvement or enhancement of the educational inputs, processes and outcomes should be ensured through a feedback loop that starts from the quality assurance or accreditation process.

OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING

The accrediting commissions in the US have developed specific standards for distance education. In the US this often means online distance education, since it was the progress of technology that stimulated the growth of the industry. The Middle States' publication, *Distance learning programs* (2002c), focuses exclusively on this medium. Distance education is expected to produce equivalent outcomes, and meet the same standards as traditional, campus-based programmes. Some institutions are purely distance education, but many universities now have distance education components. For instance, the Pennsylvania State University has a World Campus that delivers distance education online and through other technologies such as print. One of the current education debates in the US centres around distance education, which some traditional academics regard as inadequate in terms of quality when compared to the richness of a campus-based curriculum. This distrust is reflected in the legislation, where norms for student funding are linked to class time and residency.

The DETC is a national accrediting commission, specifically accredited by the Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) and the US Department of Education to accredit only, or predominantly distance education institutions, both at school and post-secondary levels, including institutions that grant degrees. Standards are developed by standing committees on which member institutions serve and these standards are then circulated to all member organisations before they are adopted by the commission. Besides the usual standards (i.e., concerning mission, educational and student services, financial probity), DETC standards focus in detail on the quality of the material, whatever the medium. Like other accrediting commissions, the DETC has recently developed a new emphasis on outcomes assessment. Unlike the regional commissions, the DETC has a number of international institutions in Britain, Ireland, Europe, Australia and South Africa, to which it gives accreditation. Middle States currently has a pilot programme with about six international institutions that have collaboration arrangements with institutions within its region.

The University of South Africa (Unisa) is one of the international institutions accredited by the DETC. Unisa began preparations for accreditation in mid-2000, with a visit from the Chief Executive Officer and the treasurer of the DETC. A small steering committee, consisting of one senior academic and two senior administrative members of staff, was appointed to undertake this task. One of the requirements of the DETC is that at least one person at the applicant university write and pass the DETC evaluator's

examination. All three members of the steering committee took part in the examination. They then analysed the standards and convened a meeting of all the academics and administrators concerned to work through all the standards. This initial meeting was followed by individual meetings with those responsible for data on various standards, to ensure that these people fully understood their tasks and the time frames. People were given three months in which to prepare the initial input, working with relevant teams within their departments or faculties. The steering team collected policy and other necessary documentation that would be used as evidence to support claims in the self-evaluation report. The information was then compiled into a draft report in which gaps were identified. The university Management Committee appointed the former Vice-Principal: Planning to include a section on strategic planning within the university. After resolving the problems encountered in the first draft, a second one was prepared and circulated to all the people who had attended the first meeting. All input was included, and the final self-evaluation report was prepared in time to meet the June deadline.

Unisa is in the fortunate position that its academic and administrative departments regularly collect data and use them to improve the quality of their services. The university also has a department that collects institutional data and conducts studies on retention, student services, staff research output and so on. Good data are essential to self-study. The university also has external validation of its quality in the form of awards given to various faculties and departments. Part of outcomes assessment relies on this type of external data to underpin internal assessments. In fact, at Unisa, it was a question of using only enough data to provide evidence of a claim and avoiding the temptation to use all the data. As it was, the self-evaluation report was a massive document. Unisa also had to negotiate, for instance, for a ten per cent random sampling of data on academics, simply because resumès from over a thousand people would have proved unmanageable.

The evaluation took place in two phases. In the first phase, the university's material was sent out to specialists at other universities for evaluation. Unisa was allowed to nominate candidates for this task, usually deans of relevant faculties at South African universities. Only one faculty had its material evaluated in the US. A certain amount of capacity was thus built into the South African system. Two of these academic evaluators were also invited to be part of the examining panel, which built further capacity. Given the imminent implementation of the CHE/HEQC in South Africa, found that Unisa colleagues at other universities were very willing to participate in this project. Other members of the examining team were its chairperson, the president of a US distance education university, and business and educational standards evaluators from the US. The university was also allowed to invite a state agency observer, and the CHE/HEQC nominated the observer. His report to the CHE/HEQC was shared with Unisa afterwards and he was very positive about the professionalism of the process. The evaluation, which took place over several days in August 2001, included one of Unisa's regional offices, as well as the main campus and the School of Business Leadership. The university was sent a copy of the chairperson's report and was allowed to send a response for consideration by the commission. Unisa was accredited by the commission in January 2002.

Member organisations are meant to take an active part in the DETC affairs. Two members of the steering team are on standing committees for business and educational standards. University representatives attend the annual conference and some of the regional workshops. There is an award for outstanding students. Unisa nominated a candidate for the 2003 award. The important factor about accreditation in the US and the UK is that the accreditation agencies are membership bodies, not governmental organisations; they are about self-regulation and quality improvement as instruments of accountability, not about control.

The merger between Unisa and the former TSA in January 2004 led to the completion of an additional self-evaluation report and the evaluation of the materials of the former TSA, with a site visit in August 2004. The new Unisa is thus fully accredited with the DETC.

The QAA in Britain has detailed *Distance education guidelines* (2002), clearly based on the Open University model, with an assumption that there will be regional offices and tutors. As in the US, there is recognition of the fact that distance education should provide an equivalent experience to contact tuition, but that there are distinct dimensions to each. For example, Guideline 1, 'System Design', states under Precept 1:

Higher education by distance learning should be underpinned by principles relevant generally to higher education. An institution intending to offer distance learning programmes of study should design and manage its operations in a way that applies those principles and, at the same time, takes full account of considerations specific to teaching its students at a distance (QAA 2002, <http://www.qaa.ac.uk>).

The document is very detailed and will not be further discussed here. However, it is clear that distance education must meet quality standards equivalent to those for campus-based education, but that it should do so within the parameters of its delivery and student service systems.

As mentioned earlier, in South Africa the CHE/HEQC is responsible for conducting institutional audits and accrediting programmes. Distance education was ignored in the CHE/HEQC's draft *Programme accreditation framework* (2002). When given the opportunity to comment on the draft, Unisa pointed out that the draft did not refer to the nature of ODL and its different mode of delivery, both in terms of systemic differences and actual academic delivery. It was recommended that ODL specialists be involved in setting the minimum standards for provision. Unisa also pointed out the difficulty in an asynchronous learning environment of determining cohorts, success rates at different levels, and throughput and the time-to-completion rates. It is not impossible, but it is more complex and this must be acknowledged. Unisa recommended the inclusion of ODL specialists in the evaluation committees that visit Unisa and in the committees that go to universities that offer some distance education components. However, in their audit and accreditation frameworks, the CHE/HEQC (2004) decided to focus on broad, generic criteria that they will apply to all South African institutions, rather than producing criteria specifically for distance education.

The CHE/HEQC has three directorates: Institutional Audits, Programme Accreditation and Quality Promotion and Capacity Development. They work on the following definition of *quality*: fitness of purpose (link to national goals, priorities and targets);

fitness for purpose (relationship to institutional mission); value for money (efficiency and effectiveness, cost recovery, responsiveness to labour market) and transformation (of the individual and society). Extensive training is being offered across South Africa for auditors and accreditors, as the system rests on peer evaluation. The audit process is aimed at development. It involves typical processes such as the setting of standards – the CHE/HEQC has settled on 19, institutional self-evaluation standards and a site visit by a team of trained auditors, followed by a report and an improvement plan. The 19 criteria focus on two areas: Area 1 relates to fitness of purpose and the links between planning, resource allocation and quality management; and Area 2 deals with teaching and learning, research and community engagement and the quality-related arrangements for each aspect. Institutions that demonstrate that they have effective quality management systems can be given the right to accredit their own programmes for the following six years (the audit cycle). The accreditation process makes judgements on new and existing academic programmes in two phases, based on 19 criteria. For the candidacy phase, the first 9 criteria are used to determine whether the institution has the potential to offer the programme. These criteria relate to minimum standards for programme design; student recruitment, admission and selection; staffing; teaching and learning strategy; student assessment; infrastructure and library resources; programme administrative services; and, where applicable, postgraduate policies. A team of three reviewers examines the application to offer a programme and can approve it, with or without changes, or can turn it down. After the first cohort of students has graduated, a site visit is arranged and the following criteria are applied: programme coordination; academic development for student success; teaching and learning interactions; student assessment practices; reliability, rigour and security of examinations; coordination of work-based learning (where applicable), and delivery of postgraduate programmes (where applicable). The evaluators will also look at output and impact in terms of the following: retention and throughput (especially in terms of race and gender equity); employability of graduates in relation to national needs and the use of surveys, reviews, and so forth, and feedback loops to ensure institutional learning. This directorate is also conducting national reviews of existing programmes. They started with the MBA and, in 2005, were working on a national review of teacher education programmes, specifically the Master of Education.

As has been mentioned, the CHE/HEQC will use the same criteria for all institutions; however, they recognise the need to train auditors and accrediting teams to evaluate distance education provision. They have thus entered into a contract with the South African Institute of Distance Education (SAIDE) and the National Association of Distance Education and Open Learning Organisations in South Africa (Nadeosa) to adapt the case studies in the portfolios used for training to incorporate relevant distance education elements. The CHE/HEQC is also perfectly prepared to allow institutions to use other criteria and benchmarks to enrich their quality systems. For instance, Nadeosa has developed criteria for distance education programmes (Welch and Reed 2005). Unisa uses the DETC standards and criteria as guidelines as well. For institutional audit purposes, the CHE/HEQC operates on the principle of institutions meeting minimum standards, but they would like to encourage institutions to exceed these standards and

improve their practices. Programme accreditation is evaluated against set standards and programmes are not approved for the candidacy phase or finally approved if they do not meet those standards.

Nadeosa's 13 criteria are valuable in enriching an institution's understanding of quality in ODL environments. They deal with policy and planning; learners; programme development; course design; course materials; assessment; learner support; human resource strategy; management and administration; collaborative relationships; quality assurance; information dissemination; and results. Welch and Reed (2005, 44–56) link these criteria to current concerns in distance education and provide ten case studies that illustrate good practices in ODL from a variety of higher education institutions in South Africa. Nadeosa would have liked the CHE/HEQC to use their criteria as a basis for adapting the current CHE/HEQC criteria, but they prefer to have one set of generic standards for all types of institutions.

CONCLUSIONS

Quality assurance is a data-driven system, which means that institutions need to establish a system of data and management information collection for strategic planning, continuous quality improvement and quality assurance purposes; they also need to include a feedback loop in this system. Data on whether the institution is achieving its outcomes must also include assessment such as surveys (students currently studying, students completing, alumni, employers), statistics on completion and retention rates. Benchmarking nationally and internationally with higher education institutions are other sources of data. However, South Africa needs to avoid some of the mistakes that have been made internationally. Morrison, Magennis and Carey (1995, 129) warn that 'universities are being encouraged to report simple, readily available quantitative measures at the expense of complex qualitative assessments of the quality of higher education, based upon professional judgments'. This tendency has also led to an unfortunate 'ranking' of institutions in other countries. It is, therefore, laudable that the focus of institutional audits in South Africa is development and not accountability as such, given that the country is looking at collaboration with a view to improving the whole system rather than competition to see which university is 'the best'. It is thus also important for university staff to volunteer to train as peer evaluators to ensure that good practices are shared in a collegial way. A further problem, internationally, is the perceived threat to university autonomy in external quality assurance measures. The planned system allows universities to guard their autonomy by moving towards self-regulation and quality improvement and gaining self-accreditation status.

Peer-driven audit and accreditation can make a difference to the quality of education if implemented judiciously. It will benefit most those institutions that take the process seriously and that involve as many people on campus as possible in the self-study and then use the results of the accreditation to improve themselves (i.e., the institutions). Involvement in the system is important to ensure that there is a contextualised quality assurance regime that fits the needs and brings about continuous improvements in the country's systems.

Large, dedicated, distance education providers understand best the systems that make ODL different from contact delivery. It is these providers who have the expertise that allows for the creation of quality courseware, particularly blended approaches based on print. Yet a quality management system that works for dedicated distance providers might not work as well for institutions that offer only niche courses through distance or who use purely online approaches, as opposed to blended approaches. Each system has to develop with an understanding of good ODL practice in mind, but also with comprehension of the specific environment. However, both good practices and the environment are constantly changing, so distance education providers must commit themselves to the following: conducting continual research into their practices; updating their policies and procedures based on this research; benchmarking nationally and internationally to establish good practice; using a variety of quality standards to give multiple perspectives on their own systems and processes; and becoming learning organisations. In many ways, the CHE/HEQC is correct in assuming that most of their generic indicators can be applied to ODL; however, space must be created in the audit and accreditation processes to explore and evaluate what is unique in the ODL environment as well.

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