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Methodology matters: Possible methods to improve quality

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Abstract

This article discusses methodological issues in relation to models of quality assurance for higher education. It first traces the historical development of the widely adopted pragmatic model and shows how this model has been adapted by the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) for the South African context. It then sets out some basic tenets of critical realism in order to critique the pragmatic model from a critical realist perspective. Finally it proposes a theory-based approach to evaluation located in a critical realist paradigm as an approach that has the potential to effect the improvement or even transformation of educational practice as a possible outcome of quality assurance.

Key words: Higher education; South African higher education; quality assurance; methodology; critical realism; improvement-orientated evaluation

Introduction

This is a conceptual article that offers theoretical and methodological resources for reflecting on the methods of evaluation typically adopted by quality assurance systems in higher education. It draws on methodological debates in social science and in evaluation theory in particular and offers insights from critical realism and theory-based evaluation as a way forward. The article aims to address two questions:

1) What are the implications and likely consequences of current models and methods of quality assurance for quality improvement?
2) What methods could a quality assurance system adopt if its goal is to improve (or transform) quality (defined here as the quality of educational practice in higher education)?

My motivation for writing this article is based on my observations (in South African public institutions of higher education) that those involved in quality assurance are typically so overwhelmed by the practical demands of getting through relentless review cycles and reporting requirements that they have little time or inclination to engage in methodological debates. A

consequence of the situation is that the quality assurance community's tendency to adopt a common sense approach to methodology in which tried and tested models are imported uncritically from one context to another.

The historical development of models of quality assurance in higher education

Typically the introduction of formal quality management systems in higher education institutions occurs as part of a drive to improve or change the management of the system. This is usually done at the instigation of the state that provides the legal framework for the quality assurance system and often links the results to funding considerations. The concepts and models for quality assurance within this 'new managerialism' (Barnett, 2003) have been imported (often inappropriately) from management theory and practice that was originally developed for the private sector.

After World War II the dominant management approach in the public sector borrowed concepts and methods from the private sector management science of the 1960s. This management science was based on the following beliefs and assumptions: goals and objectives should be determined in advance and planning, monitoring and control should be undertaken top-down; task efficiency could be determined by scientific methods; standardised measuring instruments could be used for evaluation, whilst the conditions of implementation were assumed to be fixed, stable and generalisable (Parsons, 1995).

In the 1980s neo-liberal reforms led to structural adjustments for better economic performance that included cuts in public spending. Public services were either privatised or reformed and strict controls over the cost and size of the public sector were imposed. A new public management imported new management ideas, models and technologies from the private sector such as the following: governments should steer (rather than row) the public sector; public organisations should be driven by a sense of mission and focus on earning as well as spending; governments should use the leverage of the market to encourage competition in the delivery of services; government funding should be linked to outputs via performance measurement rather than inputs; the needs of customers should become a priority in the public service and governments should monitor and improve the performance of the public services via quality assurance. This approach led to the establishment of state-sponsored quality assurance agencies and the emergence of the idea of the evaluative state (Parsons, 1995; Neave, 1998). The first national quality assurance agencies for higher education were established in the early 1990s in the UK, Europe and Australasia.

However, Vroeijenstijn (2000) argues that commercial and industrial models of quality assurance are not directly applicable to multipurpose higher education institutions. For example it is not clear whether the product produced by this public service is the graduate, the programme or research outputs. Furthermore, higher education serves a range of stakeholders (clients or customers) and the meaning of quality in the sector is itself contested. In the light of these concerns, higher education has sought to adapt the private sector model to suit its own environment.

During the 1990s general consensus developed around a generic pragmatic model for conducting quality assurance in higher education. On the basis of their research for an OECD project on Institutional Management in Higher Education involving 29 higher education institutions, seven quality assurance agencies and 17 countries, Brennan and Shah (2000) describe a generic model for quality assurance in higher education which remains based on the one originally proposed for European Union countries by van Vught and Westerheijden (1993). The general features of the model include:

- A national coordinating body with legal status but independent from government that sets out the quality assurance methods and procedures.
- Self-evaluation by institutions of higher education undertaken by academics themselves, (usually according to guidelines or requirements imposed by the external quality assurance agency, to whom they must report).
- External evaluation by peers that includes a site-visit and face-to-face interaction.
- Published reports that usually include recommendations for improvement.

(Brennan& Shah, 2000, 11)

Brennan and Shah (2000) confirm that this is the dominant model used in the case studies of their research. However they note that significant variations exist related to the focus of the evaluation (research, teaching and learning, community service or administration and management), the unit of evaluation (institution, faculty, department, programme or individual) and crucially, who owns the process and what its consequences are.

I would argue that the matter of who defines quality, that is who determines the criteria for the evaluations, (internally or externally driven) is the key issue around which contestations of ownership are fought and won. This position is supported by Vroeijenstijn (1995) who argues that because education is a context-dependent social practice without absolute standards, the definition of quality gets determined on the basis of ideology and politics rather than on educational principle.

We have no yardstick at our disposal to measure the quality of education. Standards and criteria are a matter of bargaining and negotiating between the parties involved. An absolute value for an academic level or the quality of a graduate does not exist. What is generally accepted as quality is a matter of opinion (Vroeijenstijn, 1995, 18).

Barnett (1999) goes further and contends that quality is really an empty concept, behind which is always a tacit idea of what higher education should be for (its purpose). In a later book Barnett (2003) warns that when the two ideas, the purpose of higher education and the meaning of quality become conceptually fused, quality assurance begins to operate ideologically because only certain meanings of quality are privileged, whilst others are dismissed or ignored. However, the experience of external quality assurance in developed countries suggests that the meaning of quality and the means of assuring it shift over time.

Verkleij and Westerheijden (2002) have developed a phased model of external quality assurance (cited in Jeliazkova & Westerheijden, 2002) based on two decades of quality assurance in European higher education. They suggest that all external quality assurance agencies experience diminishing returns, with easy wins for both accountability and improvement in the first round and increasing bureaucratisation and window dressing in subsequent rounds. They claim that the perceived problems that external agencies are established to solve shift along the following trajectory. Stage one addresses the problem of serious doubts about education standards. At this stage external assessment involves checking standards through technical verification against standards and criteria set up by the state. Stage two addresses doubts about the efficiency and public accountability of institutions leading to reports to the state that rank institutions and also identify good practice. Stage three addresses the problem of quality assurance capacity and institutions' need for greater discretion. Stage four addresses the need for a sustainable culture of quality improvement and the external agency begins to focus on improvement rather than accountability, producing audit reports primarily for the institution, whilst self-reporting on performance indicators is supplied to the state. It is interesting to note that Jeliazkova and Westerheijden (2002, 434) claim that progress through the stages of the model are by no means automatic. Quality assurance systems may get stuck at a particular stage or even regress to earlier stages in response to external political or economic factors, suggesting that progress through the stages of the model is by no means guaranteed.

Distinctive features of the South African National Quality Assurance System for Higher Education

In South Africa the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) has, with some adaptations, adopted the widely accepted pragmatic model and methods (described above) for both its institutional audits and programme accreditation activities (see HEQC, 2004 a-d). The HEQC has produced two extensive sets of 19 criteria with indicators, one for institutional audit and the other for programme accreditation. Regarding audit, which aims to be developmental, the main focus of the criteria is on the management of teaching and learning (although they also address research and social responsiveness). Some discretion is granted to institutions to develop their own context appropriate interpretations of the transformation agenda in their mission statement, which in turn affects the focus of the audit. Post-audit, the HEQC requires improvement plans from institutions in response to its audit reports. It does not rank institutions. The HEQC's criteria for programme accreditation are deliberately explicit and demanding in order to ensure a minimum threshold of standards for educational provision (HEQC 2004d). During the accreditation process these criteria are interpreted and applied by peer evaluators. Likewise, when it conducts its national reviews of particular programmes, the HEQC invites expert peers to adapt and contextualise its criteria for the discipline or professional field and particular programme concerned. The HEQC claims to be developing an 'integrated model' of quality assurance that combines both the accountability and improvement motivations. In the second phase of its activities, the HEQC will use the findings of all three instruments - audit, programme accreditation and national reviews - to inform its decisions about the granting of self-accreditation status to institutions.

In terms of the Verkleij and Westerheijden (2002) staged model of external quality assurance, the HEQC's programme accreditation regime probably sits at Stage 1, its audit regime probably sits across Stages 2 or 3, whilst its quality promotion and capacity development initiatives and the promise of self-accreditation status suggest that it anticipates moving the whole system to Stage 3, once minimum quality thresholds are assured.

The HEQC's shaping of the internationally accepted model of quality assurance needs to be understood as underpinned by its commitment to using quality assurance as a means of steering the higher education system towards transformation and towards honouring its social responsibility in the South African context. This is in keeping with its mandate from the Department of Education (1997) which views quality assurance (along with planning and funding) as one of its steering mechanisms to transform the higher education system and to rid it of the legacies inherited from the *apartheid* era. In its "Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education" (1997), the Ministry of Education set out the government's transformation agenda for higher education. It proposed a vision for a transformed, democratic, non-racial, non-sexist system of higher education that would "promote equity and fair chances of success", "meet national development needs through well-planned and coordinated teaching, learning and research programmes" and "uphold rigorous standards of academic quality" (Department of Education, 1997,1.14). Key problems with the system inherited from the apartheid regime were identified as follows:

- Gross discrepancies in participation rates and throughput rates by race, indefensible imbalances in the ratios of black and female staff, untenable disparities between historically black and historically white institutions - leading to the call for social justice, access, equity and redress;
- A chronic mismatch between output of higher education and the needs of a modernising economy - leading to the call for relevance and efficiency.

The HEQC is thus committed to a vision of a quality assurance system that contributes to deep

social transformation. It views quality assurance as a means of ensuring that institutions of higher education are socially responsible and committed to providing equality of educational opportunity to all South African citizens; it therefore promotes both quality development and accountability (Lange, 2007). Thus, although in its Founding Document (HEQC, 2002) the HEQC supports an eclectic definition of quality (that includes fitness for purpose and value for money), given its historical context and moral political leadership, it is likely in its practice to prioritise the fitness of purpose and transformative meanings of quality (education). The former implies locating the meaning of quality within a fitness of purpose framework based on national goals, priorities and targets (HEQC, 2002, 15). The latter is defined as

> developing the capabilities of individual learners for personal enrichment, as well as the requirements of social development and economic and employment growth (HEQC Founding Document, 2002, 14).

This means that the HEQC is committed to engaging with institutions on how they are realising the Department of Education's transformation imperative through their institutional missions, goals, and core business (teaching and learning, research and community engagement).

Basic tenets of critical realism

The article now turns to methodological matters and seeks to explore the methodological implications of running an improvement-orientated quality assurance system. In particular it aims to investigate what the methodological implications might be for the HEQC as it attempts to move the system to Verkleij and Westerheijden (2002)'s Stages 3 and 4; and at the same time to realise its vision of using quality assurance as an instrument of social transformation through creating a system of higher education that promotes both private and public good. Methodological insights and critiques draw on critical realist perspectives (Bhaskar, 1978; Sayer, 1992, 2000) and on Pawson and Tilley (1997) and Pawson (2006) who apply realism to evaluation methods. Before proceeding with the argument, it is necessary to introduce some of the basic tenets of critical realism.

Critical realism is based on Bhaskar's (1978) philosophy of science which he developed in an attempt to chart a course that is neither positivist nor constructionist. He did this by proposing a philosophy of science that holds to both ontological realism and epistemological fallibility, with the intention of avoiding the fallacy (typical of idealist and constructionist social theory) of conflating ontology with epistemology. Bhaskar asserts our common sense experience - that an external world exists (constituting of intransitive objects), independent of our knowledge of it, whilst holding that our knowledge of the world is provisional and open to revision, (knowledge is thus a transitive object). He claims that it is possible to hold the former view of reality together with the constructionist view that knowledge is social, relative and fallible. Critical realism posits that there is no absolute concept of truth and it remains agnostic about theory choice, for which, it claims, there are no universal criteria. But this does not entail radical relativism (as adopted by postmodernists). Critical realists believe that it is possible to judge some theories as better than others, on the basis of their "practical adequacy"; some theories are more useful than others because they "correspond to the structure of the real world" (Sayer, 1992,69).

Secondly, Bhaskar (1978) proposes a "stratified" view of reality as opposed to a "flat monistic ontology" (as in positivism) or a relativist, "discursively constructed ontology" (as in social constructionism). He distinguishes between three ontological strata - the *real*, the *actual* and the *empirical.* The deepest level is the *real* which consists of the structures and causal powers of material or social objects (usually unobservable generative mechanisms, liabilities or potentials). Given the nature of the objects of study and the conditions under which they can exercise their powers, critical realism aims to identify what could (potentially) happen and what

must (necessarily) happen for the world to be as it is. This approach recognises the possibility that powers and potential exist in objects unexercised,

The nature of the real objects present at a given time and place constrains and enables what can happen, but does not pre-determine what will happen (Sayer, 2000, 12).

Bhaskar (1978) defines the *actual* as the domain of events, what actually happens, if and when the potential powers identified (the real) are activated. He defines the *empirical* as the domain of experience, what we know and observe through sensory experience. However, he insists that existence is not dependent on experience and observability. We may or may not (partially) experience the real and the actual, but this is not a condition for their existence.

Thirdly, Bhaskar challenges positivism's adoption of Hume's theory of causation. This understanding of causation is based on observed regularity - "the constant conjunction of events" (1978, 12); that is, the assumption that if event b) repeatedly follows event a), then b) is caused by a). Critical realists argue that regularities amongst sequences of events and between two or more variables do not necessarily imply causation.

> The conventional impulse to prove causation by gathering data on regularities, repeated occurrences, is therefore misguided; at best these might suggest where to look for candidates for causal mechanism. What causes something to happen has nothing to do with the number of times we have observed it happening. Explanation depends instead on identifying causal mechanisms and how they work, discovering if they have been activated and under what conditions (Sayer, 2000, 14).

Thus critical realism aims to understand causality in terms of the necessary tendencies, properties or potential capacities of the objects of study and to distinguish these from the conditions in which they are likely to occur (which are contingent). Contingent relations arise from the context of the social practice and they may enable or trigger a causal mechanism or they may block it from working effectively. Bhaskar (1978) argues that in open social systems where multiple causal structures interact with each other, (unlike the closed systems of experimental conditions), the same causal mechanism can generate different effects in different contexts and the same effects can be generated by different mechanisms. This understanding of causation that recognises a gap between a causal mechanism and its effect, helps to explain the unpredictability, instability and variety of cause and effect relationships in social systems, such as eduscation. It also highlights the importance of sound conceptualisation prior to undertaking empirical research in order to identify accurately the necessary structures, mechanisms and relations as opposed to contingent conditions.

Critique of the Pragmatic Model of Quality Assurance from a critical realist perspective

Judgment-orientated quality assurance systems such as those typically adopted in Stages 1 and 2 of the Verkleij and Westerheijden (2002) model have evolved from positivist and post-positivist models of social science research (see "The Historical Development of Models of Quality Assurance in Higher Education" above). The typical judgment-orientated pragmatic model seeks empirical evidence derived from direct or indirect observation to assure the meeting of externally prescribed criteria (or in the case of fitness-for-purpose models, of the evaluee's own goals). It is assumed that a transparent language of pure description, founded on sensory experience is open to unambiguous empirical verification (Moore 2007, 34). According to Moore (2007), this approach to empirical social science research is based on epistemological foundationalism that aspires to an infallibilist notion of truth. Thus in this model it is assumed that through empirical observation, evaluators or panel members can achieve acceptable levels of accuracy, objectivity and neutrality in their judgments. The model tends to be pragmatic

about the methods used to generate the evidence that evaluators judge. It accepts as evidence both quantitative data (e.g. descriptive statistics on student performance) and qualitative data (e.g. stakeholder opinions) and treats both in the same foundationalist way.

Critical realism critiques empiricist approaches such as these for operating only at the surface levels of the empirical and the actual. According to Sayer, empiricism views reality as made up of "observable, atomistic objects and events and the regularities among them", whilst ignoring the unobservable attributes of objects such as their structure, powers and liabilities (2000, 11). Empiricism is critiqued as being based on the belief that repeated observations of patterns of events or regularities between variables can reveal significant relations. Rather, critical realism suggests that this form of research can produce only simple descriptions and extrapolations (at the empirical and actual levels), leaving the relationships between entities and their relationship to structures (the real) unclear.

In surface empiricist approaches, quantitative research designs typically examine a large number of individuals in terms of a few properties (variables) in order to make comparisons and generalisations. For example, within the population of a cohort of students, race group may be used as the independent variable for comparing the dependent variables, retention and graduation rates. Race groups are taxonomic groups whose members share the same formal attributes (race classification under *apartheid).* The findings show formal relations, regularities and patterns between these taxonomic groups and other variables, in this case academic performance. From a critical realist perspective, this provides important descriptive information, but has limited explanatory power because the members of taxonomic groups do not necessarily relate to each other structurally or causally and the attribute or variable identified is not necessarily causally significant to each individual in the group. Thus in terms of this example, empirical quantitative research can tell us that members of certain groups of students are more likely to drop out than others (extrapolation), but it cannot explain the reasons why individual students drop out because the abstraction race group is a chaotic concept that tends to scramble together both causal and contingent mechanisms and relations.

Regarding causality, the pragmatic model has long given up the quest of the experimental model (promoted by early evaluation theorists such as Campbell and Stanley, 1963, 1966) to prove internal validity (that outcome y is caused by intervention x). Instead it is content to simply check that certain inputs, resources and activities are in place and then to verify empirically the regularity with which intended outcomes are being achieved. For this reason, the model is sometimes caricatured as black box evaluation, because rather than proving a causal relation between inputs and processes and outcomes, it simply assumes one, without further investigation. The use of triangulation of data sources (but not methods) is often used to confirm the reliability of evaluators' findings. Whilst this method helps confirm conclusions about relations at the levels of the empirical and the actual (experience and events), it fails to provide causal explanations. The pragmatic model thus fails to open the black box and to interrogate actors' reasons for doing what they do. Instead, it makes do with determining the regularity with which certain inputs and outcomes (usually operationalised as performance indicators) are in place. Furthermore its flat ontology fails to penetrate to the level of the real and uncover the workings of social structure.

It is this inability to adequately address and engage with causality and its failure to distinguish between necessary (causal) and contingent relations, that prevents the findings of the pragmatic model of quality assurance from providing a launch-pad for the improvement (or transformation) of social practice. Its failure to explain to practitioners why, in a given context, some practices are failing and others succeeding, means that its findings are insufficiently diagnostic to make clear to decision-makers and practitioners what needs to change and what is within their power to change. This is linked to the failure of the pragmatic model to adequately

conceptualise the relations between structure and agency and to keep these analytically distinct. Social change (improvement or transformation) needs to address both levels, but it is triggered always and only through the thinking and acting of individual agents. This means that in order to effect change, evaluation findings and the institutional conditions under which they are produced need to be able to provide good enough reasons for individual actors to decide to change their reasoning and hence their actions. Individual actors need to work collectively with like-minded change agents in order to realise their new understandings in new forms of discourse and ultimately translate these into new institutional practices. The new reasoning and discourse of practitioners will fail to be realised in practice if institutional conditions (structures) are not also changed (by other actors in management positions) to enable, resource and reward the new ways of doing things.

The nature of evaluation criteria also needs to be interrogated. Where inputs and activities are relatively simple and mundane, it is possible to specify and apply universal external criteria fairly reliably because judgements about meeting them involve low inference logic. However, the more complex the activities, the more fuzzy and indeterminate the criteria become (Knight, 2002). Where meanings cannot be tightly tied down, judgments about meeting criteria, particularly in messy, open systems, involve long inferential leaps, leaving much room for interpretation and debate. In some evaluation situations, this involves an unarticulated (often unconscious) shift from a positivist to a more constructionist paradigm in which truth is settled by agreement or, as a last resort, through ideology or power.

This leads to the conclusion that, if improvement is the purpose of evaluation, then it needs a theoretical frame that can hold both a recognition of the independent, material reality of the world (ontological realism) and a recognition of the constructed and partial nature of people's interpretations of it (epistemological relativism), whilst keeping ontology and epistemology analytically distinct. Furthermore, the theoretical frame needs to allow an understanding of causality that can penetrate to the level of structure, whilst at the same time keeping the concepts structure, agency and context analytically distinct.

A methodology for an improvement-orientated quality assurance system

Using insights from critical realism, the article now addresses the question of what methods of evaluation an improvement-orientated quality assurance system might adopt in order to move the system towards self-regulation. A critical realist approach would focus on the causal mechanisms offered by a social intervention and try to understand how these are enabled or blocked by the relations, conditions and structures in which they are embedded. The approach would aim to identify such causal mechanisms, understand how they work and under what conditions they are activated. It would aim to uncover how necessary relations in particular contexts trigger these generative mechanisms, thus enabling their effects, and how contingent relations block them, thus constraining their effects. It recognises that all interventions are embedded in multiple social systems that exist prior to the intervention. These exist at a number of levels such as the individual capacities of individual actors, interpersonal relations, the nature of the organisational environment and ethos, the infrastructural system and the broader culture and social structure.

Programmes are met with constrained choices, located in pre-existing conditions and these, as well as the processes internal to the intervention, determine the balance of winners and losers (Pawson, 2006, 25).

This approach would shift the focus of evaluation for quality assurance to evaluating the potential of the causal mechanisms employed, how different contexts are structured and therefore, what works for whom and under what conditions (Pawson & Tilley, 1997).

An improvement-orientated approach to quality assurance located within a critical realist frame would entail changing the rules of engagement and the rules of evidence of the game. This would mean shifting from the top-down application of universal prespecified criteria across the system to developing a more context-specific backward-mapping approach that is designed to begin with self-evaluation that focuses on the reasoning of practitioners *in situ.* This focus on the understanding of practitioners (in this case those who teach in higher education) is crucial if the goal is double- as opposed to single-loop learning. In other words, the evaluation should motivate evaluees not only to do what they already do better, but to provide them with reasons for re-thinking and re-conceptualising what they do, in order to do it differently.

Pawson (2006) argues that social interventions are more than just collections of resources, personnel, equipment and activities. Rather social programmes need to be understood as engines of change that have their own internal causal logics (simply put, people do x because they expect it to result in y). Pawson argues that rather than asking "Does the system comply with x?", one should ask "how does it work, how do social programmes bring about their effects and what is the nature of their causal mechanisms?" (2006, 20). Rather than looking to empirical regularities to understand causation, this approach would begin by getting evaluees to articulate their project or programme's theory, in order to understand its causal logic or theory of change. This involves articulating the relationship between the causal mechanisms (M), the conditions (C) that enable these to operate and the effects or outcome patterns (O) of the programme. Pawson and Tilley (1997) claim that it is this programme theory (C+M=0) and the assumptions made by the reasoning on which it is based that an evaluation should test. The focus of the evaluation thus becomes the validity of the reasoning of the evaluees. Pawson argues that in social interventions, it is human intentionality and the reasoning of the participants in the programme that are the key because this is where the triggers of change are located (2006, 27).

Using teaching and learning practice in higher education as an example, this would mean requiring lecturers to articulate the theory of learning (no matter how simple), that underpins their teaching activities and curriculum design. The aim of the evaluation would be to assess to what extent this particular theory is working or failing in this particular context, and to explain why. The explanation should be able to distinguish between factors that are contingent to the theory, arising from the context, that are blocking the learning mechanism from being effective, and factors that are internal (necessary) to the theory, that may suggest that the theory itself is inadequate.

Pawson (2006) advocates three sources of evidence for evaluation: the causal mechanism or theory of change, the conditions in which it must operate and thirdly, its varied pattern of outcomes. He shows how evidence from these three sources can be used to test the adequacy of the programme's theory and produce findings with explanatory power (Pawson, 2006, 25). It is the ability of evaluation findings to tell evaluees why their programme is working or failing that provides a sufficiently diagnostic platform for improvement and change.

The question of how this theory-based approach to evaluation might be operationalised in a quality assurance system remains. The answers are not easy, especially in a highly unequal system such as the South African higher education system. A few pointers are offered below.

- The orientation of the quality assurance system would need to shift from being accountability-driven and backwards-looking to being improvement-driven and forward-looking.
- External criteria would be replaced by the articulation and testing of learning or management theories which focus on the reasoning of practitioners and managers.
- Rather than working top-down, the impetus of the system would need to work middle-out or bottom-up, with the external quality assurance agency or institutional management providing frameworks, support and incentives, rather than directives. Evaluation questions would be formulated on the ground at the level of the micro-

practices of teaching and learning beginning with self-review at course and programme level. There would need to be a system of reportage up the levels of the institution that focus on validating and under-writing improvement plans that arise from the evaluations.

- As a rough guide lecturers should focus on improving the educational effectiveness of their practice, that is, on the adequacy of their theories of learning, whilst managers should focus on providing enabling conditions and removing the constraints that block successful implementation (as far as it is in their power to do so).
- Resources and incentives would need to be offered to those who teach to build their educational and professional capacity and to ensure that improvements are adequately theoretically informed.
- Internal and external evaluators would need to be trained to use the theory-based approach and panels would need to offer disciplinary/ professional as well educational expertise.
- As the system moves towards self-regulation, the role of the external quality assurance agency would be back-grounded and that of internal self-review systems would be fore-grounded. The external agency would increasingly focus on assessing the ability of internal review systems to effect improvements and would assist institutions with resources and expertise in this regard. Where conditions pose insurmountable constraints at structural and institutional levels, the external agency should be able to muster political will, external expertise and resources to create conditions conducive to good teaching and learning practice.

Conclusion

The argument in this article is that whilst current pragmatic, judgment-orientated, models of quality assurance may be useful for checking that certain inputs, processes and outputs are in place, they do not have the methodological capacity to effect long-term continuous improvement or radical change. The critique offered from a critical realist perspective may explain why historically, during the two to three decades of their existence, external quality assurance agencies have had little impact on the quality of teaching and learning practice (Harvey & Newton, 2004; Wahlen, 2004). The argument in the article also implies that the grander ambitions of the South African government's 'transformation agenda' for its higher education system (such as equity of access and of success, efficiency and effectiveness) may not be realised unless transformation means in the first instance, transforming the cognitive and personal capacities of students, that is, making higher order learning happen. It has been argued therefore that the focus of an improvement-orientated quality assurance system should be on testing and improving lecturer's 'theories' of learning and on ensuring provision of the conditions that allow these to be implemented effectively. In this way the goal of assuring a high quality transformative learning experience for all South African students might begin to be realised - gradually.

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