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A ‘Quality Revolution’ Constrained? A critical reflection on QA methodology from the South African higher education context

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Introduction

Almost a decade since the formation of the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC), the state’s quality assurance agency for South African higher education and training, it seems appropriate to reflect on what the HEQC was set up to achieve, what it has achieved and what has constrained its success. This paper attempts a brief meta-reflection on quality assurance policy and practice in South African higher education (HE), with a focus on methodology. More specifically it seeks to answer the question ‘What are the effects of the HEQC’s QA technologies on institutional practice and how could they be more effective in achieving its mandate?’

The Development of a Quality Assurance Regime in South Africa

The source of HEQC’s mandate is ‘Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education’ (1997), a key post-*apartheid* policy document that sets out government’s ‘transformation agenda’ for higher education. Quality assurance (along with planning and funding) is viewed as one of the state’s ‘steering mechanisms’ to transform the higher education system and to rid it of the legacies inherited from the *apartheid* era. This is a modernising agenda (Soudien, 2007) led by a centrist developmental state that wants higher education to contribute to the realisation of its economic development policy as well as to social equity. The list of legacies that the ‘steering mechanisms’ are to undo is formidable and includes:

- A chronic mismatch between output of higher education and the needs of a modernizing economy – leading to the call for relevance and efficiency;
- Gross discrepancies in participation rates and throughput rates by race¹, 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 (Department of Education, 1997).

The possible contradiction or tension for HEIs in achieving greater efficiency and equity simultaneously was not entertained in the original policy discourse.

The HEQC was thus set up to design and implement an integrated² national QA system that, by means of institutional audit, programme accreditation and quality promotion, is to assure both the accountability and the transformation of the higher education system. Its transformative agenda was confirmed in its eclectic definition of quality that includes ‘fitness of purpose’, indicating 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,

¹ This paper will use throughput rates by race as an empirical level indicator of equity and transformation.

² In HEQC discourse this means it will integrate both the accountability and the developmental/ improvement functions of QA.

goals, and core business (teaching and learning, research and social responsiveness). The transformative agenda is also apparent in the HEQC's 'Criteria for Programme Accreditation' (2004) which include criteria for academic development and for the monitoring of student throughput and retention rates benchmarked against 'national requirements' (2004:24). This is in keeping with Singh and Lange's insistence that, in developing countries, QA policy should achieve some 'congruence between context, purpose and QA modalities' (2007: ix).

In order to achieve its demanding dual mandate (accountability/ efficiency and transformation/ equity), the HEQC has adopted what might be described as the 'common sense' of 'the global QA policy solution', that is, a generic, pragmatic, evaluation model based on that 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 (and in the HEQC case, evaluation criteria);
- Self-evaluation by institutions of higher education undertaken (by QA personnel and academics, (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 and Shah, 2000:11)

I now turn to what has been achieved using this model of QA.

Some effects of the HEQC's QA technologies on institutional practice

By all accounts, in the short history of the HEQC's operations, much has been achieved. For example, with regard to effects on institutional practice, Singh and Lange note greater explicitness and transparency of procedures, attention to the resourcing and monitoring of quality and greater social responsiveness (2007: xii). Soudien (2007) suggests that the HEQC's regime has led to improved internal accountability systems and a push towards greater performativity in South African HEIs, such as staff appraisal systems and a concern with international rankings. He also notes a general consensus around the state's transformation agenda and claims by HEIs to be furthering it (Soudien 2007:48). In sum, it appears that, to date, after completing the first round of audits, the HEQC has ensured that HEIs have internal QA systems in place and can be seen to be meeting its procedural requirements. Predictably, the better resourced and capacitated institutions – the research-intensive universities – have managed to meet the HEQC's requirements and outperform other types of institution, without necessarily changing their institutional practices around teaching and learning (Boughey, 2009). The implementation of QA policy has thus reinforced rather than undermined existing power relations; 'the state's modernisation project is being articulated within the discourses and structures of the old privileges' (Soudien 2007:49).

However, if the graduation rate of African South African students is accepted as an empirical level indicator of transformation³, then research suggests that little progress has been made. An analysis of the 2000 cohort for the whole system showed that by 2004 (2 years after the minimum time to graduation), 30% of all those enrolled had graduated, 56% had dropped out and 14% were still in the system. It is estimated that 44% of this cohort will eventually graduate, compared with an estimated graduation rate of 78% in England (HEFC for England). When the 2000 cohort analysis is disaggregated by race, depending on the type of programme, between 21% and 35% of black students had graduated after 5 years. In contact universities⁴, the completion rate for African students is less than half that of white students (Scott et al, 2007:17).

Unsurprisingly it is contested as to where the responsibility for these 'shocking statistics' lies and of course, an external QA agency cannot be expected on its own to undo centuries of oppression and disadvantage. Scott et al (2007) argue that the following factors that affect student performance are beyond the control of HEIs:

- Serious shortcomings of the public schooling system leading to low participation rates, particularly for Africans, in HE and to inadequate preparation for HE study.
- Socio-economic conditions (the effects of material structure) such as lack of finance for study, lack of suitable accommodation, HIV/AIDS.

However, they argue that the following factors are partly within the control of HEIs:

- Psycho-social factors (the effects of cultural structure) such as lack of self-confidence, anxiety, lack of motivation and cultural alienation from institutional cultures.
- The effects of traditional approaches to curriculum structure and design, teaching and assessment that fail to take account of the diversity and under-preparedness of the student intake.

If the goal of the QA system is to improve graduation rates, and particularly those of black students, then it needs to develop a model of evaluation that can probe at least the last two factors listed above. This may require a more sophisticated approach to methodology than has hitherto been the case.

Towards a Depth Methodology

The approach advocated here is based on social/ critical realism (Bhaskar 1979, Archer 1996). It is based on the following prepositions:

- Reality is stratified with only surface phenomena being captured by our sense and experiences. The more enduring social objects (causal mechanisms) cannot be captured by sensory experience and have to be inferred from their effects.
- Ontology and epistemology must be kept distinct (what exists and what we know about it should not be conflated). Existence is not dependent on experience and observability. It is possible to hold together ontological realism and epistemological fallibility.
- Culture, structure and agency are analytically distinct strata of reality, each with causal powers and they should not be conflated.

³ Scott et al argue that the key to improving both the efficiency and equity of the South African HE system is to improve the graduation rates of African students (Scott et al 2007:21)

⁴ These institutions have the highest entry requirements.

- In open social systems causality is indirect and multiple; there is a gap between a causal mechanism and its effects. What causes something to happen has nothing to do with the number of times it is observed to happen.
- Social phenomena are both materially and meaningfully constituted. Thus change involves shifts in actors' reasonings and self-understandings, as well as their practices and behaviours (Lockett 2007).

The social/critical realist approach allows one to critique the 'common sense' pragmatic model of QA on the following grounds:

- In an attempt at 'equal treatment', decontextualised, reified versions of 'good practice' are imposed on all institutional contexts, regardless of human and material capacity and of variations in history, cultural and structural conditions that are ontologically prior to any action by HE actors.
- The assumption that pre-specified sets of inputs and processes will (in all contexts) lead to certain outputs and outcomes (a naïve, linear view of causality).
- Descriptive, empirical level evidence is assumed adequate grounds for making judgments about quality – without due regard for the fact that evidence is an effect of (hidden) structural causal mechanisms.
- Failure to appreciate the properties and powers of cultural structures or discourses (as well as material and organisational structures) and of how these constrain/ enable institutional practices.
- As a result, recommendations for improvement are often made without understanding or engaging with actors' reasons for why they act as they do – and/or without understanding the conditions necessary for the recommended changes to occur (which are often beyond the control of the actors concerned).

In a discerning report Boughey (2009) uses the social realist approach to analyse recent audit data. She shows how the situational logic of research-intensive South African HEIs is one of a disjuncture between traditional cultural structures and the newly introduced quality assurance organisational structures. For example, although the quality assurance structures put pressure on these institutions to focus on and improve their pedagogic practice, this pressure is corrected or subsumed by the more powerful influences of the research culture. Because there are low levels of socio-cultural integration in these universities, the management of academics' teaching practices is weak and they continue to be allowed to 'do their own thing'. She shows how the discourses of institutional cultures support this - constructing subject positions for academics as 'autonomous scholars' and for black students as 'marginalised others'.

Conclusion

It has been argued that the 'common sense' pragmatic model of QA is adequate for checking 'what is' at the surface levels of observation and experience; and indeed in South Africa it has achieved a certain level of accountability in the HE system. However, if the goal of the QA regime is to change social structure (transformation) then this will require methods of social science research that can penetrate the real (structural level), in order to identify causal mechanisms and the conditions that trigger them. Such a method might enable evaluators to understand why, despite the institutionalisation of quality management systems, some things 'stay the same'. It may also give us a better understanding of what transformation of social and cultural structure entails.

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