Lesson Learned from Institutional Self-Evaluation: Infusing Pockets of Excellence from the Reviews Experiences

Jacob M Selesho

Faculty of Management Sciences
Vaal University Technology, Vanderbijlpark.South Africa
E-mail: jmseleho@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper argue from the premise that while higher education institutions are engaging in self-evalaution process, there are possibilites of developing patterns of excellence. In return this patterns of excellence will then be developed into best practices that can inform our quality assurance process in higher education institution. This paper intends to establish the learning experiences that can be learners from the self-evaluation particular with regard to teaching and learning. The research was conducted using data from the two academic departments, two reviewers panel reports and finally the quality assurance manager plan. As the study was based on interpretive study, data was collected using documental analysis of the self-evaluation reports and reviewers reports from the two department. Surely, if there is a clear system in place it will be easy for HOD's to monitor QA at programme level, furthermore to monitor the improvement based on the initial monitoring process. However, HOD's argue that the only monitoring that was in place in the institution relate to the external moderation of the assessment process. This was the only quality monitoring process that was certified and confirmed unanimously by all respondents. They did confirm that it is the policy of the university to appoint external examiners for all the subjects at the exit level. The findings reveal that although the general idea of internal quality guidelines is to improve institutional self-evaluation, its operational process was hampered by accelerated societal changes in the HE, academic heads were further compelled to take into consideration those self evaluation guidelines which are aimed at achieving the relationships between strategy, the environment, the reaction of management, the quality system and institutional improvements on the holistic view of quality mechanisms. Furthermore, it was etsablished that central idea is to eventually legitimise institutional self-evaluation programmes which will be externally validated by outside quality agencies. HoD's further reveal that, accreditation is still the most important phase, because it legitimises internally and externally defined

Keywords: Best practice, lesson learned, monitoring, assessment

1. Introduction

In the South African HE context the White Paper 3 (1997:29) is prescriptive regarding the nature of the quality assurance (QA) process including the manner in which quality has to be performed in a transformed HE, and indicates that a "mix of institutional self-evaluation and external independent assessment are to be conducted". The White Paper (1997:28) further unpack the process as followed by the promulgation of the Higher Education Act, 1997 (Act 101of 1997). In particular, HE Act makes provision for the establishment of the Council for Higher Education (CHE) and indicates that one of the functions of the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) is to assist the HEI in encouraging the culture of internal quality assurance through the process of self-evaluation. It is also important to mention that students success and the manner in which teaching and learning is taking place at the undergraduate studies is important. It is widely a held belief that undergraduate studies are critical in the success of any students at the university.

It is at the backdrop of the points mentioned above as the committee shared the same perspective as Gosling and D'Andrea (2001:11) highlighted namely, that "a self-evaluation system not only performs a regulatory function, but one that functions to improve the quality of the educational experience…".

Currently quality remains a strategic priority, namely that "Success rates must be improved, not only by interventions that are focussed on the needs of students, but also the improvement of teaching and learning practices" (DHE&T 2010-2015:23). In a study undertaken by Selesho (2012) pass rate of undergraduate students is a matter of concern among stakeholders. It is also important to mention that the academic success at the university is becoming a huge problem; hence there is a need for commitment and support of academic, students and management. It is for this reason that the funding formula was revised by the DoHeT from being input funding to focus more on output, link with the

academic success. All this challenges and coherent approach of dealing with them can only be visible through the use of self-evaluation as an umbrella that incorporates them. Since the inception of self-evaluation by the HEQC and HEI's, there has never been an indepth analysis of the process in terms of assessing lesson leraned while conducting the process. On the basis of the statement mention-above, the paper has earmarked to study the self-evaluation report with specific focus on teaching, learning and assessment at undergraduate academic programme with the regard to good parctices.

2. Best Teaching, Learning and Assessment Practice

Best practices for higher education institutions were suggested by the HEQC in 2004. It is in this regard that the HEQC in ensuring that quality academic standard is maintained decided to introduce the best practices as means of ensuring that there is some benchmark(s). In this study the focus was on three criteria namely, teaching, learning, assessment and finally programme management

2.1 Best practice(s) with regard to teaching and learning

Best practices will be discussed following various prescripts:
- Students admission
  In ensuring that highest quality teaching and learning is provided to the student, the university must focus on the *recruitment and selection process* that will ensure that the most capable people are appointed.
- Staff Development
  It is the responsibility of the university to ensure that academic staff is capacitated in matters regarding the roles and responsibility. In doing do the university must put into place a *policy on staff development* linked with the recruitment of staff (CHE 2004). Part of staff development should not only be limited to training and development but also to teach academics to critically monitor their career progression.

There are certain characteristics that distinguish the graduates except the degree obtained – such as personality, values, commitment etc. – are considered in the recruitment strategy; hence it is important that induction process must be conducted in order to introduce new appointee to the teaching philosophy of the institutions. Academic staff must be rewarded for following good practices of teaching and learning. This can be done by requesting academic staff to develop a teaching portfolio, this process has helped some academic to document their career mobility and paths (CHE 2004).

2.1.1 Lesson learned: teaching and learning

In Garlick and Langworthy (2008) view, academics tends to deal with QA issues with a lively interest of development and but the results are either doubted or not accepted. To some extent the disapproval of the results is caused by the political and lack of academic freedom in some panel discussions. In some instances this process are reduced into mere ritualistic game-playing. Similarly, Hoecht (2006) argues that QA bureaucratises academic work and decreases the level of autonomy of academic staff, thereby weakening their trust in the higher education system. Harvey (2006) pointed out that quality assessment can change the power relationships within universities in ways that may make quality assessment counterproductive as a method of quality improvement. While there are also some positive feedback that is gained in the process for instances the transparency on decision taken by the academic leader (Brennan & Shah 2000), help to develop teaching and bring benefits to students (Hoecht 2006).
- Embracing teamwork among colleagues
  Though has been discussed that there is an enjoyment of taking part in the self-evaluation process that approach must also be developed towards the results approval. In Nickel (2007), self-evaluation is conducted within a collegial atmosphere without any pressure from an external body, the self-evaluation *fosters social cohesion and teamwork* among staff and also enhances staff accountability of the results of the process. More concretely, self-evaluation also helps institutions to identify their own strengths and weaknesses, while generating awareness of key performance indicators (Harvey 2006).
- Capacity development through self-evaluation
  The process of self-evaluation is widely seen as the most valuable aspect of QA reviews because it helps institutions to build capacity from within. This *capacity-building* function of self-assessment is valuable in any

context, but it is particularly important in the countries of Sub-Saharan Africa where capacity remains very weak (Materu 2007). Self-assessment is also less costly than accreditation and can be conveniently planned within an institution's annual calendar. Thus, irrespective of whether a country has a full-scale national QA agency or not, regular self-assessments at the institutional and unit levels are the backbone of a viable QA system.

- Institutional accountability
  Instead of understanding the purpose of the self-evaluation process as essentially a response to externally imposed requirements, its fundamental purpose should be seen as to enhance institutions' capacity to conduct their core academic activities in an optimal manner (Jensen 2004). The self-evaluation process therefore provides an opportunity for an institution to engage in a thorough consideration and assessment of problem areas and developmental challenges, as well as strengths. When self-evaluation is understood in such a manner, its purpose is integrally related to a process of institutional improvement and development in terms of the quality and QA of its core activities (Kennedy 2006). While the identification of problem areas and strengths is facilitated by the HEQC's audit criteria, it remains the institution's responsibility to interpret and apply the criteria in a manner that is commensurate with its specific characteristics. Therefore, institutions should address the *accountability* requirements of self-evaluation by engaging in a rigorous scrutiny of their core academic activities, in order to develop authentic and appropriate approaches to the transformation challenges that face the South African HE sector (Jensen 2004).

- Building an internal QA culture
  A number of self-evaluation process have been developed with a considerable metric component that focus on the rigorous engagements between universities, local and regional community and the quality agencies. The approach of universities engagement with the QA agencies tend to provide a short term solution rather than building a sustainable quality culture that can be embraced by the entire institutions with clear deliverables (CHE 2004). It is in this regard that institutions should have a self-evaluation process that can focus on the longer process of continuous improvement and *building an internal quality culture*. In most cases if not all, majority of universities underscore the internal conceptualisation of the QA framework and that create a gap in the QA structuring within an institutions (CHE 2004) .

- Reflective practice
  When the self-evaluation of teaching is part of *reflective practice, it can enhance the scholarship of teaching;* this is because self-evaluation promotes the critique of practice that is often facilitated by conversations about teaching among peers and by reference to educational theory and literature (Mammen 2003). Self-evaluation and reflection on HE practice, which is written up in a teaching portfolio or published, should be recognised and rewarded in the same way as are other forms of research.

2.2 Best practice(s) with regard to assessment

Best practices with regard to assessment can discuss as follows:

- Measure of success and student Competency
  Student assessment of taught work is very important in the academic profession. It is this process that an academic assess the effectiveness and the efficiency of what has been taught. It is the most important mechanisms used to *measure the success and to declare the student competency* in a particular module (Mammen 2003). It is in this regard that universities use this mechanism to measure its throughput and academic success including students that are not making progress in their different programmes. Academic success and student progression at the undergraduate level is measured according to their success in a particular assessment (Harvey 2006).

- Importance of assessment
  In most cases HE will have a policy on assessment in complying with the best practices it is suggested that these *policy must be explicit and to certain extent guide the value of assessment, theories as well as philosophies that underpin assessment* (Mammen 2003). The purpose of the policy will be to ensure that assessment is valid, reliable and authentic. One important aspect that was clear from the best practices was the role of the external examiner or the moderator; it has become a practice that most external examiner was not aware of their role. It is in this regard that the role of assessment becomes a deciding factor in ensuring that there is transparency in the assessment process and the highest standard is maintained.

2.2.1 Lesson learned: assessment

There are various lessons learned from the good practice as suggested by the HEQC process. Coming clear from the best practice one has learned that:

- assessment has to be *fair valid and reliable*.
- It is important to review the *moderation process and procedure continuously as to build a strong process*. In most cases academic do not comply with the SAQA procedure on the level descriptors and this has been one of the imperative lesson learned.
- Finally, it is important that student right should be respected in the *assessment process and an appeal process* should be clearly formulated. Assessment should not be used as barrier towards leaning achievement but should be used as a process to verify and confirm the learning process.
- Assessment should not be used as a *punitive process but rather a developmental aspect* (Fresen 2005).
- External examining
  Within institutions of HE, use of external examiners, self-evaluation and academic audits are the most common forms of quality assurance processes. Institutions readily accept self-assessment because it empowers them and their staff to take charge of the quality of their performance without the pressure usually associated with an external review. Self-assessment also helps institutions to identify their own strengths and weaknesses, while generating awareness of key performance indicators (HEQC 2004).
- Buiding an internal quality
  Any university intend to build a sound internal quality structure, firstly institutional and there after cascade the structure at the academic programmes level. It has been widely accepted that many businesses, industrial and manufacturing have developed QA frameworks for product improvement and customer satisfaction, it is a fact these QA framework are available to HE for adaptation, but before doing that HEI's must decide what is best for their purposes (HEQC 2004). Such purposes may vary from merely satisfying the external QA agencies' requirements, to introducing serious mechanisms at the institutional level with the purpose of improving internal quality.

2.3 Best practice(s) with regard to programme management

Best practices with regard to academic leadership can be discussed as follows:

- Academic Leadership
  This entire task cannot takes place without the *proper and capable academic leader that that can manage the process*. The management of teaching and learning is very key in this regard, for the purpose of ensuring that quality teaching and learning is delivered. In return a credible and standardised assessment can be conducted with the aim of reflecting on the quality of teaching and learning that has taken place. This, in turn will lead to a process of reflecting on our teaching and learning with the sole mandate of developing best practices

Finally it is important that in trying to ensure that best practices are followed, individuals tasked with the responsibility of guarding assessment must be capacitated and armed with the necessary skills to perform that. Academic *managers must be committed and have the will to ensure that the teaching staff is upholding the highest academic standard*. In improving the assessment standard the highest quality teaching and learning must be afforded to the students (CHE 2004)

2.3.1 Lesson learned: programme management

Lesson learned from the best practice suggest that for any academic programme to deliver quality teaching and learning, it is important that there is good leadership in place. It is in this regard that the management of academic programme must be bestowed to academics that have demonstrated good leadership in so far as the staff development and mentoring of your academics into the academic profession. Academic leaders must be knowledgeable with regard to the academic programme that they are managing.

Although self-evaluation as a part of reflective practice has the potential significantly to enhance the quality of teaching, it can be problematic because of the (perceived) dangers inherent in academics revealing what might be considered to be poor or ineffective practice (CHE 2004). The best lesson learned through self-evaluation of teaching

requires academics to elicit perceptions from a number of different perspectives, this process require a good leader to be implemented. Ideally, students' perceptions of the quality of teaching need to be balanced with the perceptions of peers. A peer, in this case, might be a colleague, a member of a staff development or quality promotion unit, an external examiner or any other peer who can act as 'critical friend' and whose perceptions are based on some educational expertise. In a quality management system, findings from the self-evaluation of teaching and subsequent plans for improvement should feed into a staff appraisal system. In this way the self-*evaluation of teaching becomes a non-threatening way of identifying problems that need to be addressed and of setting future professional development goals (CHE 2007).*

3. Research Methodology

In order for the researcher to address the research question (see 1) document analysis was used as the most appropriate design. The reason for this was that more in-depth understanding could be obtained as the process is less reactive than any other interactive strategies where the researcher extracts evidence. McMillan and Schumacher (2010:361) confirmed this when they defined document analysis as "a non-interactive strategy for obtaining qualitative data with little or no reciprocity between the researcher and the participant". In this study the self-evaluation report "serve as an immediate practical purpose" by providing detailed accounts of events that unfolded during the interviews that were held with the academics (McMillan & Schumacher 2010:426). Therefore this study's document analysis denotes the analysis of official documents in the form of self-evaluation reports (2009 & 2010) of two selected schools, namely the School of Interior Design and the School of Chemical Engineering.

3.1 Paradigmatic perspective

The study followed an interpretivist paradigm due to the qualitative approach. The interpetivist paradigm focuses mainly on the individual and set out to understand their interpretation of various systems of their findings. The information gathered from the reports was used to formulate the meaning data generated by the research (see table 1.1 & 1.2). This main interpretive approach involved attempts to comprehend how institutions academics "construct meaning and explain their worlds" via academic programme self-evaluation (Terre Blanche, Durrheim & Painter 2006).

3.2 Mode of research

In this study a qualitative mode of research was employed, because it is best suited to encourages the researcher to understand the context. This context refer particularlyto the criteria for teaching, learning, assessment and management of undergraduate academic programmes during self-evaluation.

3.3 Data collection techniques

Data was collected in the form of internal self-evaluation reports of two selected schools as mentioned above. Informed consent for data collection were obtained from the Heads of Department (HOD's) of the two selected schools through the quality assurance office.

3.4 Data analysis and reporting

The qualitative data obtained from the internal self-evaluation reports were organised, analysed and presented according to three main themes (i.e. teaching and learning, assessment as well as the management thereof. Then researcher constructed categories for analysis by applying the HEQC criteria for self-evaluation for these above-mentioned three themes. These criteria guided the study in assessing its main focus and where these chuncks or group of data were assembled to make a coherent whole (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2010).

3.5 The study population and sample

The study was conducted at a university in South Africa as the unit of analysis. According to Brynard and Hanekom (2006:55) "the population of the study refers to a group in the universe which possesses specific characteristics". The

population of this study consists of all academic Heads of Department (HoDs) from the two Faculties.

In this study a purposeful convenience sampling technique was applied in selecting the appropriate sample. According to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007), convience sampling is described as a process where the researcher select a particular group, in part or whole, at the convience of the researcher. For the purposes of this study, the purposesful convenient sample consisted of two selected HODs, as they have participatedand being the key driversin the previous programme reviews, and therefore gained knowledge, skills and experience of self-evaluation at undegraduate level.

4. Findings and Discussion

Managing quality of academic programme is a difficult process for any HOD especially if the system is not regulated by a means of clear guidelines on how quality should be managed at the departmental level. It is in this regard that self evaluation reports indicate that they have a process or systems that assist them in managing quality at their department, however this process was not either regulated by the university as everybody was using his/her own method. The use of different methods did not assist the university in managing quality and improving it within the academic programme.

It can be deduced from institutional self-evaluation that lack of managing quality is a critical and process is not clear and quite difficult to monitor quality process at programme level. Surely, if there is a clear system in place it will be easy for HOD to monitor QA at programme level, furthermore to monitor the improvement based on the initial monitoring process. The only monitoring that was in place relate to the external moderation of the assessment process. This was the only quality monitoring process that was certified and confirmed unanimously by all respondents. They did confirm that it is the policy of the university to appoint external examiners for all the subjects at the exit level.

The only challenge posed by the respondent was the rigid approach used by the university in the examination process. Most if not all programmes were not at a liberty to use discipline based assessment process which is contradictory to the university policy.

The process has forced the tendency to focus on input and process to evaluate if the mechanisms develop by the University for the Assessment, which to a certain extent serve as proxy to academic quality of assessment. This is not surprising given the conceptual and operational difficulties of measuring and benchmarking the student's attainment in the whole institution. Based on this understanding the academic indicated that attempt to establish size one fits all approach have no had much success.

In avoiding not being successful most HOD's are really scarced picking from the self evaluation reports that they wouldn't like to participate in academic programme re-accreditation process based on the punitive measure attached to the process. A numbered of statements was made with regard to among others, the credibility of the re-accreditation process as well as the constitution of peer reviews.

4.1 Self-evaluation Processes

The manner and the process of compiling self evaluation by the HOD's makes the researcher to argued that the existence of SE has assumed more importance than the actual goal of assuring quality. For the HOD the system had become, to use Newton's (2000) term, a "beast" to be fed through ritualistic and largely meaningless practices. Most HOD indicated that the system is largely concentrating on the development of polices, diverting the management of quality to paper fed rather than determining the process to management the quality of the academic programmes.

It was imperative that in the current state of affairs HOD have really lost hope in the mechanisms used to improve and assure quality as they felt that they are not achieving the desired intent. In addition to that they indicated that quality assurance have contrasted the superficial nature of the "tick box" rather than being effective and meaningful forms of quality assurance, underpinned by collegial accountability. It was difficult to use the discipline based assessment at the university as more emphasis was placed on the institutional assessment.

ISE is a sub-function of management, also indicating universal relationship between planning and other functions of management. It serves the purpose, inter alia, of identifying the strengths and weaknesses of institutions, and assists HOD's in their planning and decision-making processes with regard to quality matter relating to academic programmes. It also helps them to modify and develop scenarios to accomplish institutional goals within their respective societies.

Consequently, evaluation processes have to include ongoing programmes of self-analysis by means of which an institution continuously gathers information about itself. It should also be a deliberate process used by the institution to conduct assessment of its own activities to determine discrepancies, and to suggest and implement corrective measures

and improvements. It was clear from the HOD's that the design of the self-evaluation process can be adapted to suit the specific circumstances of any academic programme, however the challenge was as perceived by the HOD's was the cascading of the management process of QA as institution.

4.2 Institutional self-evaluation

The general idea of internal quality guidelines is to improve institutional self-evaluation. However, due to the accelerated societal changes in the HE, academic heads were further compelled to take into consideration those self evaluation guidelines which are aimed at achieving the relationships between strategy, the environment, the reaction of management, the quality system and institutional improvements on the holistic view of quality mechanisms.

Propopsing a particular focus for teaching philospohy or a plan that enhance quality teaching, learning and assessment in this sense means that certain institutions are only successful if their environment does not change. For instance when admitting students that are not ready in the firts year of the university studies, this might have an impact on the teaching modalities.

However, the central idea is to eventually legitimise ISE programmes which will be externally validated by outside agencies. It implies a system of accreditation to be rounded off in phase three. Yet accreditation is still the most important phase, because it legitimises internally and externally defined

5. Concluding Remarks

The Faculty represent just one means by which the university have developed and adopted counteracting mechanisms of its own by which to address the issues of SE is really uncertainty. In some Schools it was not clear which SE guidelines they are indeed embracing, everybody was following his/her own approach with regard to the interpretation of the criteria and the management at the programme level.

Academics in this study where compelled to comply with the external evaluation system of the HEQC, while it was not clear on the internal process to be followed in achieving the external compliances, their means towards complying was to a certain extent dramatic. Critique is too central to the academics endeavour to passively accept quality mechanisms in which they have little faith.

References

Brennan, J. and Shah, T. 2000. Managing quality in higher education. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Brynard, P.A & Hanekom, S.X 2006. Introduction to Research in Management related field. Pretoria: Van Schaik Publishers.

CHE (Council on Higher Education) 2004a. *South Africa Higher Education in the First Decade of Democracy.* Pretoria: CHE.

CHE (Council on Higher Education) 2004b. Framework for programme accreditation. Pretoria: CHE.

CHE (Council on Higher Education) 2007. A case for improving teaching and learning in *South Africa Higher Education.* Pretoria: CHE.

D'Andrea, V., Gosling D. and Scott 2002. HEQC improving teaching and learning project: Report on the need analysis institutional visits. Unpublished report to the CHE.

DHE&T 2010-2015. Strategic Plan 2010-2015 Department of Higher Education. South Africa

Fresen, J.W. 2005. Quality assurance practice in online (web-supported) learning in higher education : an exploratory study. PhD theses University of Pretoria.

Garlick, S. and Langworthy, A. 2008. University of the Sunshine Coast and Swinburne University of Technology, Australia, Benchmarking University Community Engagement: Developing a National Approach in Australia

Harvey, L. 2006. 'The power of accreditation: views of academics'. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* 26 (2):207–223.

Hoecht, A. 2006. Quality Assurance in UK higher education: Issues of trust, control, professional autonomy and accountability. *Higher Education* 51:27-35

Jensen, H.T., 2004. 'Consolidating a quality culture in European universities?' keynote by the Chair, Steering Committee, EUA Institutional Evaluation Programme, Quality Culture Project, Graz Convention, 29–31 May, 2004.

Kennedy, I. 2006. Learning from Bristol: Are we? London Healthcare Commission

Mammen, K.J. 2003. A study of quality dimensions in the faculty of science of a selected university. D.Ed Theses. Umtata: Walter Sisulu University

Materu, D 2007. Constriction of Knowledge Societies: new challenges for Tertiary Education, Washington DC, Word Bank

McMillan, J.H. & Schumacher, S. 2010. Research in Education. New York: Pearson Education, United States of America.

Nickel, S. 2007. The challenge of implementing an institutional quality management system in German Higher Education institution: A case study series. Paper presented at the European Forum for Quality Assurance Conference" Quality Assurance" Held at Sapienza Universita` di Roma on 17-20 November 2007, Rome in Italy.

RSA DoE (Republic of South Africa, Department of Education) 1997a. *Education White Paper 3: A programme for the Transformation of Higher Education*, (General Notice 1196 of 1997). Pretoria: Department of Education.

RSA DoE (Republic of South Africa, Department of Education) 1997b. *Higher Education ACT*, (No. 101 of 1997). Pretoria: Department of Education.

Selesho, JM 2012. "Making a Successful Transition during the First Year of University Study: Do Psychological and Academic Ability Matter". Journal of Social Sciences. 31(1):1-10.

Terre Blanche, M., Durrheim, K. & Painter, D. 2006. Research in Practice: Applied methods for social sciences. Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press.