

**PROGRAMME REVIEWS
IN
A NEWLY MERGED INSTITUTION**

Authors and presenters:

Prof Hester Geysler (hgeyser@uj.ac.za)

Ms Ina Pretorius (ipretorius@uj.ac.za)

University of Johannesburg
South Africa

26 July 2010

**PROGRAMME REVIEWS
IN
A NEWLY MERGED INSTITUTION**

Prof Hester Geyser
Ms Ina Pretorius
University of Johannesburg
South Africa

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the value and effect of the institutional programme reviews (PRs) conducted within the University of Johannesburg (UJ) after the merger in 2005. Data were collected by means of individual interviews with UJ staff members directly involved in the PRs at faculty and institutional levels. The analysis of the data lead to the identification of three main categories, i.e. the establishment of a QM system, awareness of QA matters and the PR process itself. The conclusions focus on institutional transformation and lessons learned from the PR process. The challenge of conducting programme reviews in the absence of a QM system underpins the conclusions and the recommendations.

PROGRAMME REVIEWS IN A NEWLY MERGED INSTITUTION

1. CONTEXT

Recent transformation of the higher education landscape in South Africa included a number of mergers of existing higher education institutions, some of which established new types of universities in South Africa (SA). The University of Johannesburg (UJ), with a student population of approximately 45 000 students, based on (initially) five geographically separated campuses, was established on 1 January 2005, through a merger of a well established technikon (i.e. the Technikon Witwatersrand - TWR) and a well established university (i.e. the Rand Afrikaans University - RAU).

The establishment of a unified, integrated Programme Qualification Mix (PQM) was one of the University's goals at the outset. Instead of basically maintaining the two established institutions in a parallel federal system with a single governance structure, the UJ opted to create synergy between the two inherited PQMs. The rationale was that a critical review of the existing programmes would be an important step towards the integration of programmes at faculty and departmental level, while also reviewing the quality of these programmes. In practice, this implied an extensive process that included self-evaluations followed by peer reviews of approximately 1 800 programmes.

The former RAU and TWR employed different quality management approaches and practices that reflected the different national QA systems. In the former RAU, the quality culture could perhaps be labelled as non-obligatory: The approach consisted of voluntary participation in the self-evaluation of academic departments and service and support units, enhanced by selected peer-review panels. In the former TWR, the quality history was dictated by an external body with statutory powers to certify and accredit programmes, and the authority to withhold accreditation. It could be labelled as a culture of compliance with national programme standards prescribed by statutory and/or professional bodies. Although the newly established university did have a support office for quality matters, no formal institutional quality management system existed. This presented the UJ with a number of challenges at various levels.

2. PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

The extensive PR process led to questions about the value of the two processes, i.e. a self-evaluation followed by a peer review of each cluster of programmes. The purpose of this research is to reflect on the institutional PR process, conducted within the University of Johannesburg (UJ) from 2005 to 2008, with special reference to:

- the extent of acceptance of responsibility for quality management (QM) at faculty level
- the establishment of a QM system in the institution

- institutional awareness of quality matters
- the transformational value of the PRs.

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Clarification of key concepts

Quality in the SA higher education context (CHE, June, 2004: 5) includes the following elements:

- Quality is defined in terms of fitness of purpose and fitness for purpose
- Quality assurance is an ongoing process in which a university strives to meet national criteria
- Quality assurance serves transformation imperatives of the South African higher education.

QM in this article (loosely based on Pratasavitskaya and Stensaker: 2010) refers to a strong academic and decentralised focus that includes both processes and structures (at faculty level), integrated with a managerial approach at institutional level. QM should take place at all levels of the organization. Evaluative information should be communicated to higher management levels of the organisation to inform decision makers at all levels.

A programme is defined as the systematic teaching and learning leading to a qualification.

3.2 The development of a QM system

The processes followed when quality management (QM) systems are developed in universities are different, because universities are different. In the end, three elements of a good QM system should develop together over time, i.e. policy, structures and management.

Three quite different approaches were identified by Smout (2002: 25-27), namely:

- **The student career approach.** Areas of quality assurance are identified as one follows a student's career through university, from recruitment and enrolment to graduation. The attraction is the logical progression from first-year applicants through to postgraduate studies. The difficulty is that at any one stage in the QA process, it will be necessary to pull together a diverse range of elements which form part of the varied and complex student experience.
- **The departmental approach.** This approach is usually followed by institutions where a programme is offered by a single academic department or school. A challenge in this regard is the composition of self-evaluation and review committees that should include members representing academic as well as support units in the department or school.

- **The programme approach.** Increasingly, programmes are not based in single departments or schools, especially in large universities. In such cases, the focus on programmes, rather than teaching units, seems to make good sense. It is also argued that the student experience relates more to programmes than to departments. This approach, however, is challenging because of the complex nature of programmes offered across departments, faculties and schools.

The UJ's decision to conduct extensive PRs implied that a programme approach to the establishment of a new QM system was followed. In the turmoil and volatility immediately after the merger, the University did not have the luxury of choosing a particular approach to the establishment of QM by analysing and evaluating different approaches. Programme reviews (PRs) were accepted as a process that would address the core function of this new University.

3.3 PRs at the University of Johannesburg

In September 2005, the first PR cycle commenced, and was concluded with the approval of the 'new' programmes by Senate in 2007. Key elements of the process include:

- The self-evaluation of programmes by programme teams was followed by peer-review site visits.
- The establishment of quality management structures at faculty level was guided by a Senate-approved document, *Planning Programme Reviews*.
- A support unit (consisting of the PR coordinator) played a supportive and guidance role throughout the planning and implementation of the programme reviews, including:
 - monitoring the PR process and presenting regular feedback to the relevant Senate committee;
 - regular meetings with PR managers in the faculties;
 - conducting several workshops for academic and support staff.
- Supporting documents and guidelines were also developed and utilised by faculties.

4. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Data were collected by means of individual interviews with a diverse group of UJ staff members who were all directly involved in the PRs and included:

- PR managers (responsible for individual programme self-evaluation reports)
- programme coordinators (responsible for a cluster of self-evaluation reports to be submitted to a peer review panel)
- senior and junior lecturers
- deputy deans
- role players at institutional level.

A protocol for data analysis was applied by the researcher and verified by two external decoders.

5. FINDINGS

Three main categories of findings emerged, namely:

- The development of a QM system
- Quality awareness
- The PR process

5.1 The development of a QM system

Two sub-categories have been identified, namely:

(a) Experience of previous QM systems

Respondents (in faculties) had different kinds of quality review experiences: In many cases limited review of academic departments at other institutions. This experience, however, was positive.

No formal QM system existed at the time of the merger. In the words of one of the lecturers: "QM was done in a haphazard and uncoordinated way". There was a general lack of knowledge and understanding of the PR process. Staff members who had experienced professional council reviews, expressed a high regard for the status of such reviews. It was a positive experience as it 'forced' staff to formalise structures.

(b) Establishing a QM system after the PRs

The majority of respondents agreed that faculty processes were more systematic after the PRs. There was more structure and focus on quality improvement and standardisation in departments. Faculties were paying more attention to good governance. They met QM requirements and followed the faculty rules and strategies that were aligned with the UJ policies. There seemed to be a more formal quality agenda. Their departments were more organised, and there was more sharing of information and benchmarking in assessment.

5.2 Quality awareness

Initially, there was limited awareness, but the majority of the respondents indicated that there was an increased awareness amongst academics, as well as non-academics due to the PRs. Staff understood and related better to national and institutional quality requirements.

Staff became more involved in quality. The PRs contributed to a better understanding and a wider perspective of the coherence of policies, structures and procedures. After the PRs, staff members were more focused on programme quality and teaching and learning. The majority of the respondents indicated that their perspective of quality assurance (QA) changed and their knowledge of QA matters improved.

With regard to improvements at departmental/faculty level, the majority of respondents felt that the process was of value, as it 'forced' them to re-think their situation. They

developed a better picture of their faculties and of what was going on in departments. In one of the faculties, there was a large drive for upgrading and improving staff qualifications, in support of improving quality.

In some faculties, there was none or very little involvement or buy-in in the PR process: There was top-down departmental management where the head of the department instructed staff “to do this and that”. Some of the senior respondents mentioned that there was negativity and resistance at the beginning and during the process. As the process continued, the negativity decreased and staff realised the value afterwards.

5.3 The PR process

A number of sub-categories were identified here, namely:

a) The self-evaluation process

According to the majority of the respondents, they experienced the development of a self-evaluation report as a more critical process than the peer review. The value of the self-evaluation was that it provided them with an opportunity to organise and monitor a programme together for the first time. Many interviewees felt that they were more critical of their own practices than the external experts.

Academic staff involved in a PR had to communicate with each other; they had to work at upgrading and improving portfolios for their PRs; they learned how all modules were aligned and understood that modules formed part of a programme. They looked critically at their programmes and established that the quality did not always adhere to prescribed quality criteria.

b) Site visit by peers

Most of the respondents experienced no real frustration with or resistance to the site visits. They regarded the site visits by panels as the final culmination of the PRs. The majority of respondents, however, felt that the external experts contributed to formalising programmes, and that this was an opportunity to benchmark the status and quality of programmes against peers. They appreciated the objectivity of the external experts and regarded them as experts in their field.

Negative comments on the peer review include:

- Some anxiety with judgement from outside was experienced.
- The majority of respondents felt that the site visits were too short and superficial - more external engagement at individual level was needed.
- Some respondents were of the opinion that the panels' recommendations were not totally relevant to the UJ situation.

c) Outcomes of PRs

Programme shortcomings and problems were confirmed and recommendations made which did result in follow-up activities: Corrective measures were taken and proposed changes applied. In many cases it led to an improved understanding of the bigger picture of particular programmes. Some respondents commented that QM should refer to all institutional areas of functioning, and not only academic matters.

Staff members were 'forced' to design proper programmes. The PRs formalised programmes. The PQM was finalised and submitted to the HEQC, i.e. the University did achieve its purpose with the PRs.

Most respondents felt that before the PRs there was limited uniformity, but the PRs stressed the value of more uniformity as far as, e.g. study materials are concerned. According to the majority of the respondents, the PRs contributed to greater unity: Staff co-operation improved; there was a unified awareness of QA matters, i.e. "...the reason for doing things certain ways".

d) Impact of the merger on the PRs

Most respondents were of the opinion that especially at institutional level, the PRs happened too soon after the merger. In some cases, this resulted in widespread criticism of the PR process. Restructuring of departments and faculties took place and is ongoing. A lack of leadership at programme level was experienced.

e) Institutional support

The majority of respondents regarded the process as "strange and rather superficial - not done properly enough". More structure, proper planning and timely communication were needed. Respondents admitted that they were not sure of the need for PRs. Issues to be addressed were clear, but guidelines, policies and strategies were lacking.

In many cases, workshops were attended only by one or two staff members or by senior staff only. Most lecturing staff did not really feel involved in the reports and felt that training was not specific enough.

Documentation led to frustration and uneasiness. In one faculty, staff felt that they had started too early, "as things changed afterwards", resulting in much duplication. Dates, formats and goal posts changed. The majority of respondents found the writing up of portfolios difficult and felt that an example would have helped with uniformity and to save time. The process was well designed at the beginning, but "it became frustrating, dragging feet, not following through on institutional requirements".

f) Additional workload and time limitations

The majority of the respondents felt that the PR process involved an enormous amount of time and work and added to red tape. Lecturers felt they had to do all the work over and above their teaching and research, resulting in them being "out of the system for too long".

6. CONCLUSIONS

An interpretation of the above categories and sub-categories, lead to the following three cross-cutting conclusions:

6.1 Towards institutional transformation

Transformation in this context is not a one dimensional phenomenon. The PRs contributed to institutional transformation at different levels, albeit not at the same pace. The following developments have been identified:

The PRs contributed to greater **staff unity**: Staff came from two completely different contexts, which at first created a “them and us” situation. The fact that staff now had to focus on programmes as a core function contributed significantly to unity across faculties and campuses. Staff felt that the PRs formalised and aligned perceptions, experiences, processes and mechanisms at departmental and faculty level. This created unity and understanding and resulted in improved cooperation and communication.

On the **administrative side**, two inherited administrative systems had to be harmonised. The PRs emphasised the need for one system and the process forced administrative staff and academics alike to rethink this aspect - “a new university with a new destiny”.

Academics had to focus on programmes as a coherent and logical combination of modules to achieve programme purpose and learning outcomes. This **awareness** resulted in an awareness of the value of PRs. Faculty **buy-in** was created to varying degrees and a sense of ownership was created, providing the foundation for further development of an institutional QM system.

After the PRs, a new **QM system** was put in place. Most faculties regarded this process as a valuable opportunity to establish internal QM structures. Awareness of the importance of QM increased.

The PRs did achieve its initial purpose, i.e. to develop a unified **PQM** for the new university. The UJ was one of the first (if not the first) SA universities to achieve this. This can be regarded as a major development towards unity in one of the core functions of the UJ.

6.2 Lessons learned

Key aspects of PRs deserve special attention:

The value of **communication** in such an institution-wide endeavour can not be over-emphasised. Communication at different levels of the PRs was insufficient: An open invitation to workshops resulted in some senior staff members attending workshops, while the lecturers directly involved in the PRs did not. In the majority of cases,

academic staff members were not even aware of the available support. The 'senior' groups of respondents were more knowledgeable about the PR process. They communicated their knowledge (often) with a top-down approach and staff was instructed to adhere to guidelines, i.e. there were instances of interference from faculty staff who interpreted guidelines differently. This led to many misperceptions, e.g. that it was about departmental reviews and not academic programmes.

Although different kinds of **support material** were available, limited human resources at faculty and institutional levels were a serious constraint. The extensive scope of the PRs made it impossible for a relatively small supporting division to provide sufficient and much needed support at individual programme level. According to some respondents, the HEQC criteria were confusing, not specific enough and focused more on institutional QM matters, while others felt that the application of national programme criteria enhanced inter and intra-faculty interaction. This problem was complicated by the fact that different processes were followed in the faculties, e.g. small versus big faculties.

The PRs were **time-consuming and labour-intensive**. Time limits and additional workload created problems for staff. The workload was a constant item of frustration, which staff experienced as an additional administrative burden. They had to this over and above their normal workload and some work had to be re-done because of guidelines not received or communicated in time.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 7.1 The value and multi-dimensional impact of PRs on institutional transformation should not be under-estimated. Planning PRs should include deliberations on the existing or lack of QM systems, staff and merger dynamics, administrative implications, etc.
- 7.2 A QM system should be prerequisite for PRs. PRs cannot be conceptualised and efficiently conducted in a QM "vacuum". PRs should be phased-in to include, for example, the establishment of a (temporary) QM system.
- 7.3 Communication should be more structured to reach all relevant academic staff. A varied communication strategy for continuous implementation through-out the PR process is crucial.
- 7.4 Taking the scope of the endeavour into consideration, timelines should be flexible and varied support should be available on different levels through-out the entire process.

8. REFERENCES

- Council on Higher Education (CHE) 2004. *Criteria for Programme Accreditation*. Pretoria: CHE.
- Council on Higher Education (CHE) June 2004. Framework for institutional audits. Pretoria: CHE
- Smit, R & Geysler, H.C. (2007). Developing a quality assurance system through programme reviews in a newly merged university. Manuscript.
- Smout, M. (2002). *Quality assurance in South African universities*. Pretoria,
- Pratasavitskaya, H. & Stensaker, B. (2010). Quality management in higher education: Towards an emerging field. *Quality in Higher Education*, 16(1): 37-50.

RELATED QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The establishment of a QM system in a newly merged institution remains a challenge because of the 'interference' of merger dynamics, loyalties to inherited systems, etc. The question is whether any of the other approaches described in 3.2 would have been more effective in establishing a QM in a newly established institution.
2. The question whether a QM system should be established before or after a PR, is in fact a chicken-and-egg-question. The fact that a QM vacuum exists after a merger, poses a problem for establishing a QM system as well as for conducting PRs (as described in this paper).