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INSTITUTIONAL PROGRAM ACCREDITATION AS A FORCE FOR CHANGE IN SOUTH AFRICA HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION

1. INTRODUCTION

More recently university academics have been challenged by the increasing changes and the new higher education policies in South Africa. Higher Education Institution (HEI's) national is continually undergoing rapid changes. There are a number of reasons that compel the University to change. This can be looked from the view of the establishment of Council of Higher Education (CHE) which then mandated its quality assurance power to the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC). The government want to say something relating to the quality of education offered and secondly to determine if the tax payers money is spend wisely.

Therefore H.EI's is forced to be accountable to all the stakeholders. Value for money approach places emphasis on a "good deals" for the customer or client, usually government, employer, student and parents. It requires the maintenance of or improvement of academic standard of both graduate abilities and research output, for the same unit of resources. There is a social and political accountability which is concerned with issues such as ensuring that HEI's is accessible to those who are likely to be able to benefit from it.

Strydom & Van der Westhuizen (2001:4) further states that HEI's must be able to explain to society at large what it is doing and how well it is doing it. Furthermore institution is being confronted with the need to show their relevance, efficiency, effectiveness and quality. Van Vaught (1994: 40-44) has been arguing that the concept of accountability has two distinct

dimensions: discharging assigned mission effectively and demonstrating that these responsibilities have in fact been discharged.

This paper will look at the concepts of institutional accountability from point of the perception of programme re-accreditation.

Doherty (1997:14) further supports my approach by saying that accreditation recognises the autonomy of higher education institutions and seeks protect and uphold the institutional rights to autonomy in decision-making about quality. At the same time accreditation under lines the need to balance these institutional rights against the responsibility of HEI's to address the expectations about accountability (Sallis,1994:4).

2. OVERVIEW OF INTERNAL QUALITY PROCESS

Lategan (1997:75-80) states that an effective system of internal self-evaluation could brand the institution internationally and improve academic mobility. HEIs must be able to meet, if not exceed, the international standard. Researchers and students move from South Africa to other countries to pursue academic careers and job opportunities. The increased international mobility of students, academics and researchers leads to a growing need to understand the equivalence of qualifications, standards and credits as important aspects of quality assurance. This could further be important in the internationalisation of South African Higher Education systems, and the creation of effective internal quality assurance structures (Lategan, 1997:76). If HE can ensure that they offer quality academic programmes South African can compete with the rest of the world.

Effective internal quality assurance mechanisms (Nilson, 1997:17) can help institutions to improve their teaching and educational processes since it benefits both students and stakeholders. The good internal self-evaluation will ensure that the students acquire quality academic programmes from HEIs. Furthermore the HEIs will continuously improve the quality of their academic programmes; through this can only be done if there is effective self-evaluation

taking place. Improvements can be made after identifying both strengths and weaknesses in the process of internal self-evaluation. Lategan (1997:593) elaborates on the views of Nilson (1997:17), saying that internal self-evaluation deals with all the major issues in an institution; it reflects on the “story” of the university and the “hermeneutics” of understanding that story. According to Nilson, a good internal quality assurance report should reflect on the state of the art of the quality of a particular organisation.

If HEI’s do not adequately prepare their students to fulfil various social roles, their value in identifying individuals who are competent enough to enter the various occupation, requiring higher degrees of education and training, is lost. Thus, an educational programme that caters for both roles as mentioned above is fundamental to the growth and development of South Africa in the twenty-first century (CHE, 2003).

2.1 Self-evaluation leading to programme re-accreditation

“Internal self-evaluation is a process undertaken by individuals or members of a group in order to reflect on their activities, achievements of objectives and performance for the purpose of facilitating improvement or planned change” (Hay and Fourie, 1999:44).

The key foundation to a career is a lifelong learner and the ability for self-evaluation, which is a major component of learner autonomy or self-responsibility. It is with this in mind that the Operational Plan of the HEQC Founding Document states that: “the HEQC should investigate how best to strengthen internal evaluation capacity in providers” (CHE, 2003:15-20). Internal self-evaluation at an institution, with the aim of developing and improving the quality of teaching and learning, involves not only the managers and academics at the institution, but all stakeholders. It is important to mention that for internal self-evaluation to have an impact on the quality of teaching in practice, there should be teaching and learning involvement at every level of the self-evaluation design and implementation, which includes learners’ evaluation and facilitator’s internal evaluation (Jacobs, 2000:69-74).

2.2 Principles of Good Practices

In general Fredericks and Haan (2001: 519) believe that the evaluation of quality can comprise four main good practices: transparency of the education, research and administrative processes within higher education institutions; validation of standards and qualifications obtained by students; accountability to donors, students and other stakeholders of higher education; and the improvement of the quality of education, research or administrative processes within higher education.

To make sure that funding allocated for higher education is spent wisely, and also via the value-for-money approach, each institution must be accountable to all stakeholders, i.e. students, government and the parents. The fostering of accountability usually takes place through external, independent peer reviews or audits of institutions and faculties, programmes. One of the main tasks of the peers or auditors is to provide externally accessible information on how the funding has contributed to the educational achievements.

The principles of good practices are based on the following aspect:

- Transparency of the education, research and administrative process within higher education institutions
- Validation of standards and qualifications obtained by students
- Accountability to donors, students and other stakeholders of higher education; and the improvement of the quality of education
- External evaluation-related to improvement.

Self-evaluation is the foundation of quality assurance, especially because sound self-evaluation is a prerequisite for quality improvement.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

For obvious reason one would like to get clarity regarding how academics feel about institutional accountability particular with focus on programme reaccreditation.

I then decided to use the School of Teacher Education, at the Central University of Technology as a unit that have experienced the HEQC presence. A sample was drawn from the School of Teacher Education. For confidentiality purpose I then decide to use unstructured interview instead of questionnaires as people still feel uneasy about discussing the report as it is still confidential. Ten (10) Lecturers in the School of Teacher Education were selected. The reason for selecting these ten lecturers was based on their participation in previous reaccreditations by HEQC.

Unstructured Interview was conducted and views of the lecturer were documented. The lecturers were requested to reflect on the HEQC practices as part of institutional Accountability and Documental analysis were used as I was personally driving the process.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Academics believe that the HEQC decision regarding the process is rather extreme and very harsh.

The lectures feel that the HEQC is definitely not developmental in its approach, that is, it is not willing to credit initial and emerging efforts towards the provision of an qualification in Teacher Development. All the faults and short comings identified in the previous national teacher review programmes does not constitute any terminal effect on any student's learning, nor destruction of any effort by anybody. These efforts merely fall short of achieving the ideal. Under the circumstances lecturers raised the concern that the approach is lacking in order to achieve the required standard in Higher Education.

The response above touched on some salient points raised by the HEQC Committee but the fact of the matter is that this evaluation was too harsh, too a-historical and totally missed and/or negated the bigger picture. The point is, if an program is withdrawn the institution will finally not provide the program. Surely the stakeholders will loose in terms of being afforded the opportunity to equip themselves with the required skills. Education System will loose greatly and there will be a backlog among stakeholders. This would also affect the response of the province to knowledge economy and will retard progress to levels never reached even during apartheid era. The growing level of knowledge and conceptual sophistication being natured in the province and country generally will be lost and we may find ourselves having to import expertise from outside the country soon.

5. CONCLUSION

One critical question that the paper wanted to address was the role of academics in the programmes re-accreditation process, as well as to establishing whether they understood the role of the government in this whole exercise. Instead of probing one question and getting an answer, the researcher found that the academics had multiple issues regarding programme re-accreditation. The whole exercise of programme re-accreditation starts with programme self-evaluation. Literature has indicated that programme re-accreditations is evidence-based evaluation. The programme is evaluated according to the agreed criteria in the programme Accreditation Framework Hand Book. The programme is evaluated according to what they claim in the self-evaluation document prepared by the institution.

The academics believe that the government predetermines the results of programme re-accreditation. They further believe that the government is applying the recommendation of NCHE. It was quite interesting to listen to academics, particularly when they supported the view that the recommendation of NCHE in terms of categorising the university is not something of the past. It is important that the issue of academic freedom must be read in conjunction with institutional autonomy. The government has

a huge responsibility in ensuring that the subsidies allocated to HEI are utilised for a good cause, and that are also accountable to the taxpayers.

It was interesting to note that although academics want to participate in the programme re-accreditation however, they still have a fear of failure. Those fears foster a negative re-accreditation concept among academics in HE. For that matter, academics will create a platform to hide their failure. A numbered statement will be made with regard to among others, the credibility of the re-accreditation process as well as the constitution of peer reviews. The paper further recommends that the first step in programme re-accreditation should perhaps be in the form of improvement or enhancement of quality. This will be a good buy-in approach for most, if not all academics. The idea was to use the self-evaluation as an improvement tool but from the data it was clear that academics had overrated their programme to a large extent, and that they were even disappointed with the outcomes of the re-accreditations.

The HEQC should perhaps run a pilot study on some new mechanisms, particularly in grading the criteria for programme re-accreditation that will help to standardise the criteria for outcomes projections.

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