

Quality practices in teaching by academics in higher education

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Abstract

Higher education institutions are challenged to offer quality teaching to help address societal challenges. Different stakeholders within higher education institutions have different roles to play in ensuring that the teaching provided is of high quality. These stakeholders include academic staff, facilities departments, university senior management as well as the students themselves. Academics are one of the important stakeholders, who need to ensure that there is quality teaching taking place. The aim of this study was to explore how academic staff enact and embrace quality in higher education and how they attribute their quality practices.

This was a qualitative study in nature, as it seeks to obtain detailed explanations from the academics themselves on what quality practices they enact. Working within an interpretive paradigm, I wanted to understand how academic staff enacts quality and what informs these enactments. Attribution theory was used to understand whether the enactments were as a result of institutional and national factors or resulted from individual factors where academics within themselves enacted the quality practices as a result of wanting to provide quality teaching. A South African University of Technology was used as a case study. Qualitative data was generated, using semi-structured in depth interviews. Respondents were purposively sampled to participate in this study. The study found that academics had various quality practices which can be attributed to institutional factors rather than individual factors.

Introduction

Higher Education institutions are faced with a challenge of producing quality graduates who can meet the needs of the country. The consequence of producing quality graduates will be the growth in the economy and development in society. In order for institutions to produce quality graduates, quality teaching needs to take place. Academic staff members are at the core of ensuring that higher education Institutions offer teaching which is of high quality.

Academics worldwide are also normally confronted with a range of national and institutional quality assurance and promotion systems. Teaching and Learning quality assurance processes are as important for staff as they are for students. For students they ensure quality education, for staff they pinpoint all the milestones that need to be passed to ensure a quality education is delivered (O'Rourke & Bulushi, 2010: 206).

In addition to my own personal interest in this area, I am responsible for 'driving' quality in my department. In enacting this quality champion role, I noticed that there were different quality practices enacted by academics in their teaching. There were also different reactions by academics to quality initiatives introduced by the University Quality Unit. These different reactions towards quality mechanisms made me realize that some academics view quality processes as too administrative and time consuming. Whilst others saw it as an opportunity to obtain feedback from students. On the other hand, others do not trust the institutional and national processes. They see these processes as paper chase exercises (Cheng, 2009). "These interpretations are indicative that within academic communities in that the concepts of quality management have been variously welcomed, ignored, and strongly resisted" (Houston, 2007: 8 and Borden, 2011) explain that one answer we often hear from members of the academy when discussing quality issues is 'because we have to'. In this paper I argue that this compliance approach is not suitable for promoting quality teaching and learning in higher education as it mainly prioritizes organizational factors over individual factors.

The study was thus aimed to explore how academics' embrace quality in their teaching and how they respond to the university quality initiatives. Houston and Paewai (2013) noted that there is little information regarding the impact of quality assurance on teaching, learning and research. Saarinen, (2010) states that quality has moved from being a controversial concept to being an everyday language. However in this paper I explore whether academics view quality as being a controversial concept or they have embraced quality in their teaching.

Krause (2012) states that interested parties in this issue of quality could be students, academic staff, university managers, community groups, government, employers, research sponsors and the media. Parents could also be interested in knowing about the quality of teaching at a particular institution.

Previous studies which have been conducted in this area include Jones and Saram (2005); Brunetto & Wharton (2005); Cheng (2009); O'Mahony & Garavan (2012); Jibladze (2013) and Anderson (2006). In these studies, academics felt that they did not identify well with the quality processes. Normally there are questions regarding the intentions of these teaching and learning quality initiatives, Mertova & Webster (2009). The questions could be about whether the quality initiatives are for accountability and control purposes or they are intended for enhancing quality. Mertova & Webster (2009) further highlighted that most quality assurance systems are mostly management driven, not taking into account the human-centred aspects. Institutional teaching and learning quality processes are to help academics reflect on their teaching. "Reflection means looking back at something and thinking about what happened and why it happened" (Killen, 2010: 109).

To further understand quality issues in higher education, Watty (2006) states that if you want to find out more about quality matters in a higher education institution, then you must ask those closest to the student academic interface – the academics or the students. However Saarined (2010: 56) states that "the voice of academic community has become subdued consequently, its values less clearly presented". Equally in South African schools, there have been various studies regarding the Integrated Quality Management System (IQMS) where it has been found that educators do not identify with the process (Biputh, 2008; De Clerq, 2008 and Hibbers, 2006).

This paper draws on an ongoing PhD study, the main aim of this paper was to explore academics' quality practices in higher education at a particular university of technology. I wanted to ascertain whether the practices were informed by internal factors or external factors. In this paper Internal factors will be categorized as individual factors (lecturer's background, motivation, attitude, understanding of quality and personal teaching philosophy) external factors will be categorized as institutional and national factors (national policy, institutional policy, faculty and departmental structures, discipline and students). Currently there is a strong focus on quality in the entire higher education sector. A number of factors have been associated with the focus on quality education. These factors include concern for a potential decline in academic standards as well as loss of confidence in academic quality management (Njoku, 2012).

In the South African context; quality is seen as a mechanism for promoting transformation in higher education (CHE, 2008). Quality improvement has also been emphasized in the Green Paper for Post-School Education and Training (2012) in that the DHET's main focus will be on promoting the improvement of quality because a large section of the post-school system offer a less than satisfactory quality of education (DHET, 2012). South Africa has a strong policy framework that supports the enactment of quality at all levels of Higher Education and it is important for academics to pay attention to quality assurance and promotion practices. Another importance of

this study in the South African context is that the second cycle of institutional audits (2012–2017) was aimed at putting emphasis on quality teaching and learning (CHE, 2011). Furthermore the Quality Enhancement Project has also been recently introduced. In this project, university teachers have been identified as focus area number one on the Draft Framework for the Quality Enhancement Project (CHE, 2013). Equally on an institutional level, Cheung and Tsui (2010) state that quality is the responsibility of the institution and it should be embedded within the institution's culture, mission, strategy, organizational structure, learning and teaching, student support and operational activities. Therefore it is important that quality culture is promoted at institutional level (Ehlers, 2009).

The research questions in this study were: What are the quality practices enacted by academics in teaching? What informs these quality practices?

The concept of quality

Quality is a concept that is not always easy to define as it means different things to different people. It is also difficult to identify the absence of quality since you cannot touch it, but if quality is lacking at a particular institution there are usually complaints from different education stakeholders including students. There are different explanations and interpretations of the concept of quality in higher education. For example, there are five approaches to quality as defined by Garvin (1984); product orientated approach, customer oriented approach, manufacturing orientated approach and the value for money approach. Harvey and Williams, (2010, 7) described the notion of quality in higher education as “having many facets and different perspectives and as a multi-faceted notion which must be interpreted in terms of purpose and context”. Furthermore Newton (2002) highlighted that academics at departmental levels defined quality as a ritual, a token, for impression management and quality as a lack of mutual trust. Maguire & Gibbs (2013) also highlight that quality is defined differently by different stakeholders in higher education. Lim (2001) similarly highlighted that definitions of quality in higher education, are as many as the stakeholders. Lim (2001: 14) further provides five definitions of quality; quality as a way of producing perfection through continuous improvement, quality as performance, quality as the ability to transform students and as the ability to provide value for money.

From the above definitions, the fitness for purpose is the definition which is mostly adopted in higher education, as it accepts that quality has no meaning it depends on the purpose of which a particular process is designed for. Other definitions of customer oriented and value for money, seem to portray higher education as strictly for business purposes which should not be the case as institutions have societal roles to fulfil. In this paper, the notion of quality in teaching will be defined as the ability to transform students on an on-going basis and add value to their knowledge and personal

development (Lim, 2001). This definition was also interrogated by Lockett, (2010) in that quality assurance in South Africa is also a mechanism to transform the higher education system. Universities engage with transformation in a variety of ways. Transformation can be seen as a way of fully adding value to students throughout their learning. This definition is also in line with one of the three HEQC' approaches to quality in that: transformation in the sense of developing the capabilities of individual learners for personal enrichment, as well as the requirements of social development and economic and employment growth (CHE, 2004). In this study, quality will also be conceptualized as the ability to develop appropriate graduate attributes.

Theoretical framework

Using attribution theory as a theoretical framework, I wanted to ascertain academic's quality practices and also ascertain what informs these practices. "Attribution theory tries to explain whether the behaviour is internally or externally caused" (Robbins, Judge, Odendaal & Roodt, 2009, 119). This theory was originated by Fritz Heider, (1958) adopted by Kelly (1967), then by Weiner, (1972; 2000). Attribution theory tries to find reasons for people's behaviour (Werner, 2007). It tries to determine why people do what they do (Oghojafor et al., 2012). Oghojafor further states that attribution theory has been used in education, law, clinical psychology, and in the mental health domain. In this study, attribution theory was used to attribute academics' quality practices. "Looking for understanding is the basic motive of attribution theory" (Pan, Zhu & Zhu, 2008).

The aim of the study was to explore whether these quality practices can be attributed to internal factors or external factors. Internal factors refer to one's personality. These are factors that originate from within, they are personal reasons to practice quality for example this could be an academic's teaching philosophy, motivation, attitude, educational qualification and personal understanding of quality. The internal factors could determine how an academic enacts quality. External factors refer to environmental, institutional and national factors; these could be institutional peer reviews, student evaluations, programme reviews, institutional quality processes and national quality processes. The external factors could determine how quality is enacted in a particular institution. Both the external and internal factors are relevant and significant in ensuring quality teaching. One should not dominate the other. The internal and external factors as constructs of attribution theory were used to understand the quality practices. Quality practices referred to what academics identify as acts of enhancing quality in their teaching.

Research method

This was a qualitative study in nature, as it seeks to obtain detailed explanations from the academics themselves on what quality practices they enact and how they adopted quality in their teaching. Working within an interpretive paradigm, the study aimed to arrive at a descriptive understanding of the quality practices. Thomas (2009) explains the main point of an interpretive paradigm as being more interested in people and the way they interrelate. Researchers working within this paradigm seek to understand how people create and maintain their social situations (Burton and Bartlett, 2009).

A South African University of Technology was used as a case study. The use of a University of Technology as a case study, was generated by the mandate these institutions have in providing career focused qualifications (Du Pre, 2009). It is therefore important that students studying at these Universities of Technology are exposed to quality teaching so that employers can receive quality graduates. As Wynona Latham noted in the Sunday World newspaper article on 23 February 2014 that currently there is an assumption that traditional Universities offer superior qualifications as compared to other institutions.

Qualitative data was generated, using semi-structured in depth interviews. Nine respondents were purposively sampled to participate in this study. Interview questions were firstly piloted with academics who were not respondents in the study. After piloting the questions, interview questions were then adjusted to ask more direct questions. The questions asked in this study were open questions with probes used to elicit more information from the respondents. Interviews of 30 – 45 minutes were conducted by the author between June and August 2013. Before the interview and during the interview respondents were assured that they will remain anonymous throughout the study, their real names will not be used. Trustworthiness of the data was ensured by making sure that I conducted the interviews myself, tape recorded them and transcribed each interview on the day the interview was conducted before moving on to the same interview. This allowed me to improve my interviewing skills as a researcher before moving on to the next interview (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). Semi-structured interviews were transcribed then the content obtained from the interviewees was analysed in order to construct themes which emerged from the data (Turner, 2010). The quality practices identified by academics were also documented.

Findings

After the interviews were transcribed, key themes were identified from the interview transcripts. These themes were then categorised according to internal factors and external factors. The study found that academic staff primarily attributed their quality practices to external factors than internal factors. Academics attributed their quality practices to external factors such as having to adhere to the outcomes of the subject; being scared by e-mails from the quality unit; having to conform to the institutional

requirements for example organising files in preparation of programme reviews and having to make the subject content and the assessments more understandable to the type of students who enter higher education. Others attributed their quality practices to internal factors such as personality and a personal desire to provide quality education.

The next phase of analysing the interviews, involved identifying the quality practices identified by the respondents. The quality practices identified by academics were:

- Internal and external moderation of assessments
- Writing reflective notes
- Studying for Masters and PhDs
- Obtaining verbal feedback from students
- Writing memos to HoDs regarding non-attendance
- Preparation of lectures
- Preparation of the subject content
- Formal and Informal communication with colleagues
- Administering of lecturer and subject evaluations
- Liaison with professional bodies
- Student placements during Work Integrated Learning
- Preparing documents for programme reviews

From the above quality practices, it can be noted that academics have a wide range of quality practices. Some of these practices are national and institutional practices whereas some are initiated by the academics themselves. The writer has grouped these practices into feedback practices (evaluation forms, verbal feedback from students, programme reviews). The second group of practices were organizing practices (preparation of lectures, preparing teaching materials, moderation of assessments). The third group of practices were communication practices (liaison with colleagues, professional bodies and other institutions). The fourth group of practices were reflective practices (reflective reports).

Feedback practices

The common practices amongst academics interviewed were feedback practices which mainly involved administering of subject evaluations and lecturer evaluations. These are institutional evaluation forms, which are to be administered by each academic staff in order to obtain feedback from students regarding quality of education being offered. Respondents voiced their unwillingness to administer these evaluation forms. Academics also expressed their concerns on whether students really understand the questions asked in the institutional evaluation forms. Respondent J stated that:

The responses from those evaluations are not good in a sense that students think it's just a questionnaire we gonna (sic) lie. And you know I got things like; I like her hair, I like her eyes, I like the way she speaks. Which is not what you actually looking for. ...So students are not being serious.

Zerihun, Beishuizen and OS (2011) also questioned the implications of the use of evaluation questionnaires to evaluate effective teaching. They ask whether students and teachers have different understandings of teaching and learning.

Organising practices

Respondents also revealed organising practices which involved mainly internal and external moderation of assessments as well as preparing the subject material and preparing for lectures. Academics interviewed felt that moderation was an important institutional quality process used for ensuring quality. Respondent H pointed out that:

Obviously we do the moderation of the tests as well he he.

They also cited preparation of lectures as important for enhancing quality.

Communication practices

Communication practice was another group of practices which was identified by academics. This mainly involved informal communication with colleagues, liaison with professional bodies and writing memos to HoDs regarding student attendance.

Reflective practices

The minor practices identified by respondents were reflective practices. These involved writing reflective reports at the end of the year or semester in order to improve one's practice for the following year or semester.

Respondents were then asked to state the reasons for these quality practices mentioned above. This was to ascertain whether these practices were informed by

external factors or internal factors. It became evident that the reasons were more externally informed (institutionally informed) rather than internally informed (individually informed).

Academic staff interviewed felt that they had to ensure quality teaching because the institution required them to do so.

“I do all this because the institution requires me to do so, it’s policy I am being honest you know” (Respondent C).

Respondents that were interviewed also pointed out that because of the workload they have, they were restricted to certain quality practices. They stated that in some instances they cannot even think about the quality of their teaching as they are always rushing to the next lecture. This was also evident in the data whereby those academic staff members who were responsible for one subject only had a variety of quality practices in teaching as compared to those who had three subjects and more. There were also concerns regarding the main emphasis being placed on programme reviews rather than the actual act of improving the quality of teaching. Respondent A succinctly pointed out that:

I do not think I am alone in saying the ideas generated and the requirements of the quality unit in preparation for reviews is time consuming paper pushing filing. Time that could be better used more productively for students purposes. Quality does not exist in a document somewhere, quality exists in the classroom. Quality ultimately what we should be looking for we should be looking for those attributes of our graduates. What are students taking away from the institution? They are not taking away how lecturer ... kept well his/her subject file.

This finding is in line with Krause (2012), who states that a wicked problem such as quality, for instance institutional audits are for accountability purposes rather than quality enhancement purposes.

The matter of improving lecturer’s qualifications proved to be significant as respondents cited their previous educational background, as one of the reasons for their quality practices. This was explained by Respondent H:

When I did Honours and Masters as well, we were encouraged to reflect. We wrote reflection papers.

Finally the issue of the type of students who are coming to higher education institutions proved to be a challenge to academics as well as the growing numbers. One respondent pointed out that

“We are having to compromise a lot on quality, to accommodate the type of students we are getting” (Respondent G).

The issue of mergers also seemed to have had an impact on the quality of teaching provided as some academics felt that the issue of institutional mergers negatively impacted the quality of teaching. Van der Westhuizen (2011) also found that university mergers had negative implications for staff and the institutions.

The findings in this study have implications for quality management structures, policy development, academics attitudes and motivation as well as staff development initiatives as it showed that there is a disconnection between academic staff and quality processes. This concurs with findings by Jones and Saram (2005) where academics did not identify with the quality processes. The structure and culture in higher education institutions will also have to be looked at and be adapted to promote academic centred quality enhancement which should be a bottom up approach instead of the current top down approach. Issues of workload, number of students and appropriate teaching resources will also have to be looked at across the different campuses. The study showed that academics' quality practices are mainly informed by external factors which are not sufficient, as quality enhancement need to emanate from the individual academics themselves.

Conclusion

In this research the exploration of quality practices by academics was undertaken. The main aim was to identify the quality practices and understand the reasons behind the practices. The findings showed that academics practice quality in their teaching mainly because of external factors rather than internal factors. This can mean that academic staff practices quality for compliance purposes rather than for a genuine interest to offer quality teaching. The interviews revealed different attitudes towards the institution, attitudes towards students and towards the institutional quality processes. From the study it is evident higher education institutions need to pay attention to encouraging quality teaching to emanate from internal factors by putting more emphasis on staff development programmes which can help university teachers to gain different skills and attributes required for ensuring quality teaching.

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