Quality Assurance through Curriculum Development

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Abstract
According to the literature, quality, quality assurance and curriculum development are complex concepts that need to be addressed before stating what constitutes a quality assurance curriculum development process. Pond (2002) emphasised quality as a major priority that should be listed at the top of most institutions’ agendas. Improving quality is regarded as the most daunting task facing any institution, due to the dynamic nature of quality and the multidimensional concepts that are involved. The participation of various role players in curriculum development contributes to the fact that ‘quality’ is considered to be a controversial concept. Quality is not easily measured because of major discrepancies in people’s views of quality and because no two experts agree on what constitutes a good university or a good curriculum. The key purpose of quality assurance at institutions of learning is to ensure the improvement and effective performance of the participants involved in a programme. Gawe and Heyns (2004) state that quality processes must be built in from the outset in order for these processes to become the providers of a quality management system. Once this aim is reached, quality will become evident in the inputs, process and outputs of curriculum development. It is thus essential that each phase during the process of curriculum development be quality-driven from the outset. The aim of this paper is to reflect from a quality assurance perspective on my experience concerning the various challenges that were encountered in leading a curriculum development process involving various role players. This is a theoretical paper in which concept analyses as method was used with the aim to support rational communication of those involved in assuring quality in curriculum development.

Keywords: Curriculum, curriculum development, quality, quality assurance, quality culture

Introduction

Human and academic projects form critical arenas for transformation at the University of the Free State (UFS). The uncompromising attitude towards academic standards is approached with an openness to confront and address deep social and academic issues.

In 2009, the Faculty of Education (FoE) was constituted at the UFS as a separate faculty. The vision, mission, faculty structure and proposed new initial teacher-education curriculum provided the foundation for strategic thinking in the Faculty as well as a clear statement regarding academic excellence and a commitment to social justice.

Intrinsic to the transformation process is the notion of quality. It is the intention of this contribution to reflect specifically on the process of the development of the initial teacher-education curriculum through the lens of quality assurance.
1. Quality and Quality Assurance

1.1 Terminology

There is no consensus on what defines the concept 'quality' or an accepted 'objective' definition of quality. Quality assurance is described as 'the planned and systematic activities implemented in a quality system so that quality requirements for a product or service will be fulfilled' (ASQ, n.d.). The US Department of Health and Human Services (n.d.) equates this description with 'quality improvement'. According to their view, quality assurance (product-centric) measures compliance against predetermined standards, whereas quality improvement (process-centric) is proactive with the aim to improve the processes and the systems.

In Higher Education (HE) the quality of an academic programme can be determined at two levels (Luckett, 2003). Firstly it is about interrogating the extent to which the purpose of a programme adheres to the mission and vision of the institution. This is seen as a 'fitness of purpose' judgement with product as focus. Secondly it refers to the alignment that can be established between the inputs, processes and outcomes of a programme. At this level, the programme should demonstrate the intended purposes which is a 'fitness for purpose' judgement with process as focus. 'Fitness of purpose' is judgemental by nature, whereas 'fitness for purpose' is developmental by nature (Luckett, 2003).

There is no consensus in the literature on what distinguishes the concepts 'fitness for purpose' and 'fitness of purpose'. Vlăsceanu, Grünberg and Pârllea (2007) define quality in terms of 'fitness for purpose' that conforms to generally accepted standards as defined by an accreditation body. This contradicts their view of quality as a transformation process. A transformation process is about change, development and the encouragement of one's critical ability that enables the student to become a lifelong learner (Harvey & Knight, 1996). Campbell and Rozsnyai (2002) pointed out that 'fitness of purpose' complements 'fitness for purpose' to ensure comprehensiveness and relevance of purposes in order to ensure improvements. It is important to take note of Harvey and Newton's (2009) concern that, during the quality assurance processes, a compliance mode can work against improvement. This is cause for concern in the South African HE context where both external and internal role players are involved in quality assurance.

1.2 Role players in quality assurance

A procedural approach to quality assurance might not be supportive towards the improvement of that programme, but curriculum developers can use the Stewhart cycle for quality assurance to guide them through heuristic steps (Plan, Do, Study, Act) needed to ensure that the processes are as efficient and effective as possible (Weinstein & Vasovski 2004). It is most likely that curriculum developers will intuitively follow this cycle of quality assurance due to its simplicity and logic.

Four prominent social roles in quality assurance in HE function within two categories, namely 'the involved' and 'the affected' (Luckett, 2003). Three of these roles belong to 'the involved' category. The clients are the students and the
motivation for quality and/or improvement of student learning provides the motivation for quality assurance of the project. The decision-making and expert roles are both externally and internally represented. There are internal decision-makers within Higher Education institutions (HEIs) and external decision-makers from government and other government agencies. The internal experts will be those within faculties as well as staff from planning units at HEIs responsible for the quality assurance project. The external experts can be from accreditation bodies and from the Department of Higher Education.

Lastly, the role of the affected in the second category is the academics responsible for the implementation of quality-assurance policies. The key role of academics in quality-assurance varies according to their involvement in the formulation of and their disposition towards the policies (Luckett, 2003).

1.3 Developing a quality culture

It can be counterproductive if a HEI only focuses on the efficacy of systems (compliance mode) that generate reports and not on the engagement with the heart of the academic endeavour to ensure development. HEIs need to move away from an audit culture. Stakeholders should rather be empowered, especially those fulfilling the role of the affected, to critically engage in establishing a quality culture that is supportive of continual improvement which, in itself, can be regarded as a form of accountability (Harvey, 2009).

Harvey (2009) as well as Harvey and Stensaker (2008) raise important aspects to be considered when establishing a quality culture. According to them, a quality culture:

- cannot be imposed;
- should be creatively developed and integrated with everyday practices;
- cannot be disengaged from a wider lived reality;
- is a lived, learned experience that generates rather than simply processes knowledge;
- a critical engagement with the ‘way of seeing’;
- is not a tool but a socio-political construct;
- demands a critical deconstruction of the purpose and underlying ideology behind the quality-assurance requirements;
- is nothing if it is not owned by the people who live it, and
- merges with the ideological preconceptions of the central characters and is rendered invisible.

2. The need for Curriculum Development of initial teacher-education programmes

Policy documents from the State on qualification frameworks and teacher qualifications necessitated the re-design of initial teacher-education programmes in South Africa. A shortcoming (quality risk) in the design of programmes in the past was that national directives were uncritically adhered to without challenging their fundamental assumptions. That resulted in teacher-training programmes that emphasised the implementation of the curriculum of the day instead of
professional teacher-education programmes seeking to educate professionals who will be able to interpret, design and implement a curriculum.

The challenge was thus to design quality initial teacher-education programmes which are not compliance-driven but developmental by nature and that could address the needs of education within the context of the broader schooling community.

The first step in designing a curriculum theoretical framework is to analyse and understand the education and institution contexts.

2.1 Stakeholders

Since 2008, lecturers in the FoE at the UFS have been involved in the process of re-conceptualising a curriculum for initial teacher education and understanding the process of curriculum development. Forces impacting on a curriculum; phases of curriculum development; three major representative curriculum designs; approaches to curriculum design; curriculum design dimensions and principles guiding curriculum design were interrogated (Carl, 1995; Doll, 1974; Ornstein & Hunkins, 1998).

A bottom-up approach was followed in conceptualising the design of the curriculum for initial teacher education. Various stakeholders such as alumni, students, principals, and mentor teachers at schools were involved in this process. Officials of the DoE were invited to workshops with a view to obtaining their opinions and inputs regarding the needs and challenges facing education in practice. Student involvement materialised through written and verbal input from alumni and through continuous participation from current students. As part of a reflective exercise, lecturers and students visited functional and dysfunctional schools that portrayed the rich diversity of the school context in South Africa. During these visits, the students interviewed members of the school-management team with the aim of understanding the context of the school and to take cognisance of challenges facing teachers daily in implementing the curriculum. Collaborative reflective discussions followed on these visits and students wrote group and individual reflective reports on their experience. These reports served as resources contributing towards the conceptualisation of a teacher-education curriculum.

The intention to establish and foster a culture of critical engagement and development through self-empowerment in curriculum development was paramount in this process and bear evidence of a quality assurance commitment. A curriculum reflective group met twice a month since 2010 to engage with the curriculum-development process. All academics in the Faculty (including external visiting scholars) were invited to critically engage in monthly debates on burning issues regarding the curriculum process. These meetings were informative and provided a platform for further engagement to all academics of the Faculty. Recurriculation has been a standing point on the agenda of faculty board meetings since mid-2010.

Lecturers from the Faculty visited other faculties of education at HEIs in South Africa to reflect on their process of conceptualisation and designing of the curriculum. Colleagues from different institutions in South Africa were also invited to share their perspectives on the redesign of an initial teacher-education
curriculum at a seminar in February 2011 with discipline co-ordinators from our Faculty.

All of the above provides the means and platform to critically engage with the design of the BEd programmes.

2.2 Purpose of the initial teacher-education programmes

The design process started by reflecting on the question: “What should a Bachelor of Education graduate at this Faculty be able to do?” The discussions with various stakeholders (see above) and reflections and engagement with literature on initial teacher education generated a list of attributes that we believed our graduates must have (Fwu & Wang, 2002; Passos, 2008).

Against this background, and taking cognisance of national imperatives, the purpose of the BEd programme was formulated, namely to provide a well-rounded education that will empower graduates with an integrated knowledge base enabling them to demonstrate applied competence, commitment and responsibility as academically and professionally qualified beginner teachers. Implicit to this purpose are the qualities supportive of both the academic project (making the institution an excellent, internationally recognised research-intensive university) and the human project (development of a community of diverse people, based on tolerance, openness and reason).

Knowledge played a pivotal role in the design of this curriculum which is in line with a student-centred curriculum design and is also supported by Young’s (2013) statement, namely that: “… curriculum theory must begin not from the learner but from the learner’s entitlement to knowledge.” Content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) and curriculum knowledge were central to the design of this curriculum. These are also the kinds of knowledge that a teacher needs (Shulman, 1986).

2.3 Generic curriculum framework

The conceptualisation of this teacher-education curriculum provided evidence that a curriculum should be progressive, implying that both process and product are valued. Although the curriculum was designed around the student, the boundaries between this design and the other two forms of design, namely subject and social problems designs, were blurred due to the fact that the importance and value of knowledge and social forces impacting on the curriculum needed to be strengthened (Du Toit, 2011).

The approach to the design of the curriculum is both experiential and holistic (Carl, 2009). The institutions values, namely academic freedom and autonomy, excellence, fairness, service, and integrity (www.ufs.ac.za 2011) overarched the entire process of the curriculum design. These values served as the ‘glue’ that ensured a holistic integrated approach instead of a fragmented approach in the design of the curriculum. Effective learning (De Corte, 1996) is the driver of the learning process, emphasising the importance of social and cognitive learning as well as the balance between these two types of learning.

The foregoing discussions led to a generic structure for a BEd qualification. Students’ entitlement to knowledge implied that relevant knowledge types discussed above were at the core of this curriculum. Only at this stage relevant
policy documents from the institution and statutory documents from the state were rigorously interrogated by all academics at various workshops. More external (DHET staff) and internal (DIRAP staff) role players were invited to critically engage with the curriculum reflective group and the rest of the academic staff on the envisaged curricula. This continued until the programmes were submitted to the various statutory bodies for approval.

2.4 Reflection on the quality assurance of the curriculum designed

Members of the Curriculum Reflective Committee (CRC) served on task teams of the Council of Higher Education (CHE) that evaluated various education programmes at South African institutions. The programme director also served on the accreditation committee of the CHE. Most of the CRC members serve on various committees related to academic planning, teaching and learning and policy development at the UFS. It can thus be accepted that action taken by the CRC and the leadership provided by them were most probably intuitively from a quality-assurance disposition.

Quality assurance was not the formal starting point or the driver of this curriculum-development process. There is though a correlation between the literature on quality assurance and the various actions taken in the process of re-conceptualising the initial teacher-education programme at the UFS.

The restructuring of the FoE was a transformation process which involved every staff member of the Faculty which to a large extent contributed towards establishing a culture of belonging. The re-curricululation process provided the means to build forth on this culture, and intuitively a culture of quality developed. This was enhanced by a theoretical framework based on strong academic arguments that led to the formulation of the purpose of this programme. The purpose and, ultimately, the intended curriculum were not the result of the work of one or two persons, but it was rather a socio-political construct owned by all academic staff. This was a lived, learned experience integrated with everyday practice that generated knowledge. All academic staff must aim to “live” this curriculum when implementing it. The dissemination of this curriculum and its expectations were inherent to the process, implying that all academic staff members were continuously informed as they co-developed the curriculum. None of the role players who fulfilled any of the four social roles participated from a position of power. The curriculum development process supported continual improvement and growth. The curriculum furthermore adhered to the design dimensions, and this in itself created a sense of the staff owning the curriculum.

National and international external experts were requested to evaluate the programme. This is evidence of the dynamics of the curriculum-development model where the designed curriculum is evaluated before being implemented. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive, but some aspects that need to be reflected upon were pointed out and were improved.

In summary it can be stated that a culture of quality was successfully established (although mostly intuitively) when measured against the guide lines of a quality culture (Harvey, 2009; Harvey & Stensaker, 2008). The programme demonstrates the intended purpose and it can thus be referred to as a ‘fitness for purpose’ judgement which is developmental by nature. The ‘fitness of purpose’ judgement is in process.
3. Quality assurance of the last two phases of the curriculum development process

The biggest challenge in the quality-assurance process will be to ensure that the implemented (experienced) curriculum is equivalent to the intended curriculum. ‘Fitness to practise’ must be achieved. Students who successfully complete the degree must register with the Council for Educators in order to get a license to teach in South Africa. This is no guarantee of ‘fitness to practise’. However ‘fitness to practise’ could be ensured by challenging students with real-life simulations lasting a few days in which they must demonstrate their applied competence. Their degree certificate could be a proof of ‘fitness to practise’ based on successful completion of the simulation challenge together with a portfolio (compiled over two years).

Evaluation by means of a longitudinal research project, where students’ performance and attitude are researched over a period of three years, could be supportive to the continuous improvement and growth of this programme.

Conclusion

Quality assurance can easily become a system driven by the bureaucracy. The challenge is to move away from an audit culture towards a quality culture. This is possible if the process of curriculum development is based on sound academic grounds and facilitated by good and informed leadership. Within such a quality culture ‘fitness of purpose’ will complement ‘fitness for purpose’ that could ensure comprehensiveness and continual development and growth.

Quality culture needs to be conceptualised by all involved. All those involved in the process should have faith and experience certainty in respect of the curriculation. It must create harmony and moral love among students, lecturers and role players in various schools involved in teaching experience and in the community at large. Excess of, for example, autonomy and/or procedures must be excluded. The curriculum-development process must add symbolic meaning and lead to development and growth within the institution. Finally, the curriculum-development process should provoke a critical disposition in students and academics. This implies that role players should be able to discern and reflect on curriculum-related issues in the broader sense of the word.

References


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