

The Impact of Quality Concerns on Institutional Culture(s): Navigating the Impossible?

Purpose – The need to offer high quality programmes has become something of a survival challenge for many universities both nationally and internationally. In most countries there are regulatory mechanisms and statutory bodies to assure such quality of provision by universities and other higher education institutions. In spite of the self-interest and the benefits thereof, some universities continue to struggle with establishing an institutional culture that puts a premium on quality teaching and learning. The purpose of the paper is to investigate how concerns with quality in South African universities have helped to (re)shape institutional cultures especially with respect to teaching and learning.

Design/methodology/approach – Qualitative research methods were used to collect and analyse data on perspectives regarding the relations between quality concerns and institutional structures and practices at Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT). Findings from the analysis of the Higher Education Quality Committee's (HEQC) Audits, the Quality Enhancement Project (QEP), Professional Bodies' Audits and Internal Programme Reviews on quality issues where these relate to teaching and learning are presented.

Findings – The data suggests that concerns with the quality of teaching and learning at the institution have led to significant changes to the institutional culture of the University. More significantly, the shifts in institutional culture is more evident in the replacement of “default modes” of ensuring quality with more deliberate initiatives to produce quality graduates by deliberately structuring and orchestrating quality teaching and learning experiences for students. The paper further traces institutional efforts to shift from ‘default modes’ of quality to focused and deliberate attempts to produce quality graduates by offering a quality teaching and learning experience. Using the conceptual/theoretical lens of Schein (1988) the paper discusses the opportunities and constraints to the development of alternative institutional cultures that promote and enhance quality.

Originality/value – This research addresses a gap in current research on quality in higher education by linking issues of quality to institutional culture(s). This work is not only relevant for higher education institutions in South Africa, who currently struggle with shaping new post-apartheid institutional cultures that embrace quality, but is also relevant for other universities across the globe where change has become a norm rather than an exception.

Keywords – Quality concerns; Teaching; Learning; Institutional Culture; Quality Graduates.

Paper type – Research paper

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