

Exploring Stakeholders' Experience of Implementing Quality Enhancement in Selected South African Universities

Mercy Sondlo and Chaya Herman

Abstract

In 2014, the Council on Higher Education in South Africa introduced the Quality Enhancement Project (QEP) with a view to addressing the failure of traditional audits to improve student success and throughput. Through the lens of Bowe, Ball and Gold's (1992) policy implementation theory, this article explores stakeholder experiences of the implementation of this intervention at four universities in South Africa. A qualitative, multiple case study research design was applied and data were collected using in-depth individual interviews, focus group interviews and document analysis. The findings revealed that whilst there were both positive and negative outcomes in Bowe et al.'s (1992) three contexts, the context of influence had the potential to influence change, while those of policy text production and practice did not bring about the envisioned change. This highlights the complexities of policy implementation due to the different contexts of and approaches to QEP implementation. The findings suggest that the QEP was unsustainable due to a project mentality among stakeholders, the effects of the unstable Higher Education environment, the lack of a change theory, policy borrowing, insufficient funds and a lack of resources.

Key words: quality enhancement, project mentality, higher education, South Africa, policy implementation

En 2014, le Conseil sud-africain de l'enseignement supérieur a introduit le projet d'Amélioration de la qualité (« QEP », Quality Enhancement Project)

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avec pour objectif de se pencher sur l'échec des audits traditionnels qui ont pour objectif d'améliorer le succès et le flux de production de la population étudiante. A travers le prisme de la théorie de la mise en oeuvre d'une politique publique de Bowe, Ball et Gold (1992), cet article analyse les expériences des parties prenantes dans la mise en place d'intervention dans quatre universités en Afrique du sud. Un plan de recherche basé sur une étude qualitative de cas multiples a été mis en oeuvre et les données ont été rassemblées en utilisant des entretiens individuels approfondis, des entrevues de groupe et des analyses de documents. Les résultats révèlent que, tandis qu'il y avait à la fois des conséquences positives et négatives dans les trois contextes de Bowe et al. (1992), le contexte d'influence avait le potentiel d'encourager le changement, tandis que ceux de la production des textes et des pratiques de politiques publiques n'ont pas fait aboutir le changement envisagé. Cela met en valeur les complexités de la mise en oeuvre de politiques publiques à cause des différents contextes et des différentes approches de la mise en oeuvre du projet QEP. Les résultats de l'étude suggèrent que le projet QEP n'était pas viable à cause de la logique de projet parmi les parties prenantes, les effets de l'environnement instable de l'Enseignement supérieur, l'absence d'une théorie du changement, une politique de l'emprunt, des fonds insuffisants et un manque de ressources.

Mots clés: amélioration de la qualité, logique de projet, Enseignement supérieur, Afrique du sud, mise en oeuvre de politiques publiques

Introduction

Recent literature points to the failure of quality assurance (QA) mechanisms in higher education (HE) to enhance students' attainment of graduate attributes for employability and assure student success (Martin and Parikh, 2017; Openo et al., 2017). South Africa's Council on Higher Education (CHE) defines student success as "enhanced student learning with a view to increasing the number of graduates with attributes that are personally, professionally and socially valuable" (CHE, 2014, p. 1). Thus, measurements of 'success' are linked to students' completion of their education through improved learning experiences in the classroom, enhanced institutional support, students attaining skills that are relevant to the job market, and employment opportunities to become productive citizens (Tinto, 2012; Scott, 2018; Grayson, 2019). This trend led to the growth of quality enhancement (QE) as a movement across various HE systems (Gvaramadze, 2008; Land and Gordon, 2013; Elassy, 2015; Wil-

liams, 2016). The emergent QE movement advocates for student-centred, cooperative and collective approaches underpinned by trust, institutional autonomy, academics' ownership of QA processes, and increased stakeholder engagement (Crawford, Horsley, and Parking, 2019; Leisyte and Westerheijden, 2014). A similar pattern was experienced in some African higher education institutions (HEIs) in Kenya, Namibia, Mozambique, Nigeria and South Africa (Maxel, 2017; Pretorius, 2003; Zavale, Santos, and Da Conceição Dias, 2016). In South Africa, a quality enhancement project (QEP) was introduced in 2014 as a short-term project by the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC), a subcommittee of the CHE, after its first round of institutional audits from 2004 to 2011. Conceptually, it lacked set targets or assessment measures and indicators of success. This was problematic in the implementation stage as there were no monitoring and evaluation tools. The QEP was born out of concerns raised by institutions and academics that quality management systems (QMSs) and processes were not addressing teaching and learning issues and were falling short of assuring the quality of teaching and learning (CHE, 2014a). It was modelled on the Scottish Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF), which advocates for inclusiveness with particular emphasis on student engagement in QE processes (Gunn and Cheng, 2015; Gvaramadze, 2011). For the purpose of this article, which focuses on QEP implementation, inclusivity refers to context-specific issues. We argue that student dynamics and institutional cultures differ from context to context. Therefore, bringing together diverse student populations, cultures, races and genders is key in inculcating a culture of inclusiveness based on broader stakeholder involvement and transparency in the implementation of QE. Student involvement in this context refers to participation in QEP processes.

The QEP comprised of a system of reviews by peers from institutions and experts in the field of QE that aimed to improve teaching and learning and capacity building. It promoted the concept of quality as transformation (Harvey and Green, 1993), which should lead to improved student success and throughput (Sosibo, 2014). The QEP was operationalised as a two-pronged approach at the undergraduate level. The initial phase (2014-2015) had four focus areas: enhancing academics as teachers; enhancing student support and development; enhancing the learning environment; and enhancing course and programme enrolment management. The second phase (2015-2017) focused on transforming the curriculum.

The QEP was concluded in November 2018² and the CHE introduced a new project to be rolled out across HE, namely, the Integrated Quality Assurance Framework (CHE, 2017a). This article discusses the extent to

1. The terms Quality Assurance and Quality Enhancement are commonly used in South Africa whilst Internal and External Quality Assurance are commonly used in the European Higher Education Area and parts of Africa.

2. https://www.che.ac.za/focus_areas/quality_enhancement_project/QEP-Events

which the QEP achieved its targets and investigates stakeholder experiences of its implementation at four South African universities.

The following section focuses on the difference between QA and QE practices in HE globally. This is followed by a review of the literature on the implementation of QE and the challenges experienced, the theoretical framework applied in the study, the methodological approach, the major findings, discussion, and the conclusion.

Defining QA and QE

Quality assurance is defined as the policies, procedures, systems, strategies, values and attitudes adopted to ensure continued improvement in the quality of educational processes (Kahsay, 2012). Quality enhancement refers to continuous improvement in the context of the quality of teaching and learning (CHE, 2014). In other words, QE is associated with bringing about change in teaching and learning. A nuanced discussion of these concepts is presented below.

Comparing Quality Assurance and Quality Enhancement

The dominant view across HE is that QA is a top-down, accountability driven process intended to assure control and compliance (Groen, 2017). It is commonly viewed as state driven through accrediting bodies and government agencies and emphasises meeting specified standards through policies, procedures, monitoring and evaluation (CHE, 2014b; Nicholson, 2011). It is argued that since QA denotes the policies, procedures, values, attitudes, resources and actions that are required to ensure that standards are maintained and enhanced, practice often translates to a mere “tick-box” exercise and compliance measures (Harvey and Williams, 2010). Arguably, QE is viewed as bottom-up, pragmatic, self-regulatory, and shaped by emerging culture based on the values and principles of collegiality, inclusivity, ownership and enhancement (Saunders and Sin, 2015), creating the assumption that it is a superior tool to capacitate an institution’s internal processes. Hence, some countries have turned to QE to focus attention on inward institutional enhancement processes (Elassy, 2015; Groen, 2017; Gvaramadze, 2008; Openo et al., 2017; Williams, 2016). This trajectory is based on the notion that QE is contextualised to fit the institutional circumstances and dynamics, instilling a culture of continuous improvement with regard to the quality of teaching and learning, especially for staff in a university environment, and involves deliberate steps and initiatives aimed at motivating staff by giving them the time, incentives and the means to improve quality (Ndebele, 2014). However, it should be noted that there are no areas of marked difference between QA and QE. They have a common agenda; that is, to ensure the delivery of

quality educational goods and services. According to Weber and Dolgova-Dreyer (2007), QA becomes inputs into the QE cycle. Therefore, QE is the quality outcome of QA which suggests that the two processes are complementary.

Studies on the Implementation of QE

The literature reviewed points to recent developments and the shift from QA to QE resulting from the increasing emergence of QE globally as a movement towards change. The review focuses on stakeholders’ understanding of this shift, the meaning attached to QE and its implementation strategies across HE. An analysis of QE models in 11 countries, Scotland, the United Kingdom (UK), the Netherlands, Spain, Australia, the United States (US), Canada, Finland, Ghana, Ethiopia and South Africa, highlights the shifting trends and patterns.

The Scottish, US, Finnish and Ethiopian models emphasise a stakeholder-focused approach to teaching and learning. They subscribe to inclusiveness, transformation (change) and stakeholder participation. The Scottish and US models are more comprehensive, and have broader scope and applicability. Both go beyond the involvement of students and other stakeholders in QA processes by affirming the principles of “partnership” and “ownership” of decision-making in QA and QE processes. The Ethiopian model is relevant in the ‘developing’ world context. Its main focus is addressing weaknesses in the standard setting and monitoring instruments of the QA agency. The discussion centres on policy shifts and their impact on change processes. The Scottish and Ethiopian models have been cited as good practice models in Europe and Africa, respectively. For the purpose of this study, which focuses on stakeholder experiences of the implementation of the QEP, attention is focused on the Scottish model because the South African QEP is modelled on it.

The literature identifies the Scottish Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF) and the Finnish stakeholder-oriented approach as best practice models in European HE. The Scottish QEF was developed in 2003 and involves a bottom-up, consultative, pragmatic and collegial approach based on mutual trust among all stakeholder groups (Land and Gordon, 2013). However, Saunders and Sin’s (2015) study on the way in which ‘middle managers’ in nine Scottish HEIs enacted the QEF revealed a multiplicity of implementation challenges. These included academic versus management (leadership) practices, constraints placed on middle managers by university policies and procedures, the lack of a voice or input into strategic review plans, lack of financial control, lack of training, unequal treatment, and the fact that middle managers’ decision-making is constrained, among others.

The Finnish case mirrors the Scottish model as an embodiment of stakeholder-oriented approaches, with “stakeholders [continuing to develop] structures and study fields while at the same time maintaining trust in the long-term changes made” (Kallioinen, 2013, p. 107). One of the strengths of this model is student-centric research and development (R&D), implying the centrality of students as actively taking responsibility for their studies (Kallioinen, 2013, p. 113). This is important, as QE is used as a leverage for continuous development and student empowerment. If not well managed, the introduction of an institution-wide pedagogical model, taking into consideration the “competence and coping ability of teachers in the turmoil of change” (Kallioinen, 2013, p. 113), could prove to be a challenge in another university context. This is crucial as there is no critical assessment of the QEP’s ability in the South African university sector to monitor or elucidate the practical implications, given that the newly introduced QEP was not sustainable.

Problem Statement

Little research has been conducted to assess the “functioning of internal QE in African HE” (Zavale et al., 2016, p. 105). In South Africa, QE is a relatively new area and researchers rely on government documents such as the QEP framework and the accompanying guideline documents. There is thus limited empirical research on stakeholder experiences of the implementation of the QEP. This limits available evidenced-based information and places constraints on contributions aimed at developing new theories to inform practice in the field of QE.

Theoretical Lenses of Policy Implementation

The article draws on Bowe, Ball, and Gold’s (1992) conceptualisation of policy implementation as a theoretical lens to understand and explain stakeholders’ experience of the implementation of the QEP. Bowe et al. (1992) refer to three contexts of policy implementation. The context of influence involves the consultation, negotiation and manoeuvring that lead to the conceptualisation and formulation of the policy itself, where various policy actors interact. It is within this context that contested ideologies or policy borrowing influence the policy process. The context of policy text production involves the complex process of text production based on wide consultation by soliciting stakeholder inputs. Finally, the context of practice is where the policy is eventually implemented. In this context, policy is received, “interpreted, translated, adjusted and worked differently by diverse sets of policy actors, in processes of enactment in specific contexts” (Singh, Thomas, and Harris, 2013, p. 466).

Methodological Approach

A qualitative multiple-case study research design was employed and the sample comprised of four universities representing the different types of institutions in South Africa, namely, traditional universities, universities of technology, comprehensive universities and merged universities, (DHET, 2014). Traditional universities offer academic and professional university degree programmes similar to merged universities within the framework of a programme qualification mix (PQM). Merged universities are the product of a merger between two or more institutions brought about by the restructuring of the HE education system after 2000 to eradicate the divisive apartheid HE landscape and to meet the demand for social justice (DoE, 2002). Universities of technology, formerly known as technikons, offer vocationally oriented diploma and degree programmes (McGrath and Nickola, 2008). Comprehensive universities offer a combination of traditional university qualifications and those of universities of technology (DoE, 2004). Inclusion of a historically disadvantaged university would have made for a more robust study. However, the sample was small due to time and financial constraints.

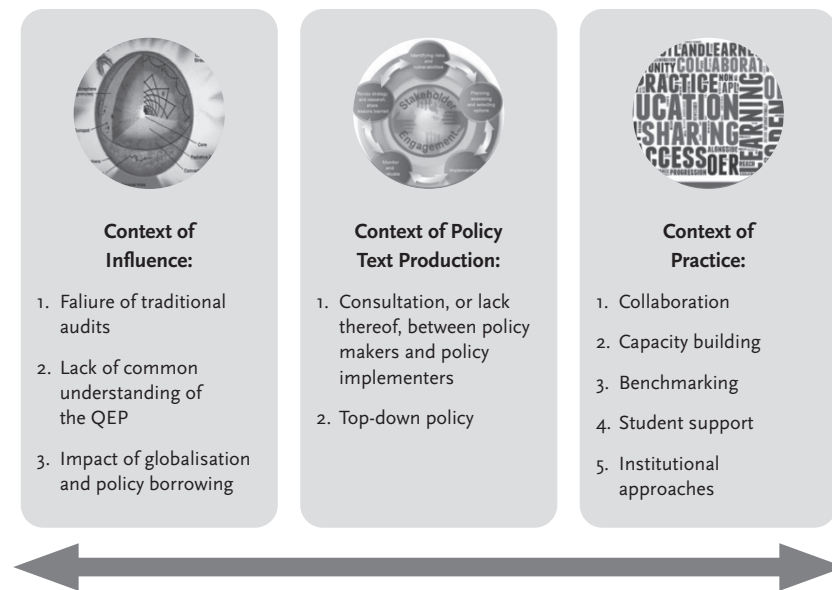
The data were collected in 2017 and 2018 using open-ended and semi-structured individual and focus group interviews to obtain an emic perspective on the lived experiences of the participants, as well as document analysis (Creswell, 2009). Purposive sampling enabled the selection of respondents that were best able to answer the research questions (Bryman and Bell, 2015). The participants consisted of four CHE and Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) ‘EQA’ directors (referred to as policy makers), six participants from the university of technology (University A), two participants from the traditional university (University B) and the comprehensive university (University C), respectively, and three participants from the merged university (University D) who were involved in the QEP. In addition, eight Student Representative Council (SRC) leaders were included from Universities A, B, and D.

Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the participants and the institutions. The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and an hour-and-a-half. The interviews were recorded and transcribed and the transcripts were analysed manually to extract meaning. Relevant documents, including QA policies, procedures and processes, the QEP framework, good practice guides, institutional reports and feedback reports, were analysed. The initial coding phase involved *in vivo*, process and ‘open’ coding in accordance with the grounded theory framework that informed the research.

Major Findings

This section is structured according to the analysis of the major findings corroborated by Bowe et al.'s (1992) theory on policy processes, which points to complexities in policy reflected in the contexts that frame such processes, namely the context of influence, the context of policy text production and the context of practice, to explain the QEP's implementation.

Figure 1. The Implementation of the QEP – Adapting Bowe et al.'s (1992) Theory



Context of Influence

This sub-section examines the contextual factors that influenced the shift towards the QEP. These include the failure of traditional audits, a lack of common understanding of the QEP, and the impact of globalisation and policy borrowing. Traditional audits refer to an institution's self-assessment of its policies, systems, procedures, strategies, resources for quality management of its core functions of teaching and learning, research and community engagement as well as support functions in line with its mission and goals (CHE, 2004).

Failure of Traditional Audits

Stakeholders indicated that the failure of the traditional audit system was the principal driver (attractive influence) of the shift from QA to QE and

aimed to address systemic failure in educational quality. Concerned about an ailing system of traditional audits which was not adding value (CHE, 2017) and was ineffective in driving change in the HE system, coupled with the inadequacies of compliance-oriented approaches and turnaround time, the CHE turned to QE as a new vision for change.

... the process of conducting audits across the sector took much longer than was anticipated ... It became clear as the last audits were being done that it probably would not be in the best interests of the higher education sector to do another round of audits like that. It also became clear that the area in which there was the greatest need for the next cycle of audits was teaching and learning ... that process culminated in the QE project. (Participant 2A: CHE)

The CHE's vision was corroborated by a stakeholder from the university of technology, who compared the technician or "tick-box" approach to quality in the audit system with QE's improvement-led approach.

... the institutional audits ... check list or tick-a-box in that first cycle of audits did not add value in terms of improving the quality of teaching and learning ... and so in the second cycle ... CHE considered focusing on enhancement which is more developmental than assurance. (Participant 6A: University of Technology)

However, some still preferred traditional audits to continued enhancement or improvement.

I personally thought we could have gone through the second cycle of audits perhaps being more specific to teaching and learning but not being enhancement, more on audits still. So we understand the auditing element in terms of why are you doing this? How are you doing it? What we are expecting you do. (Participant 13B: Traditional University)

Lack of Common Understanding of the QEP

In the context of policy text production, the findings revealed the complexities surrounding the shift from QA to QE, a lack of common understanding of what QE is, the role played by the QEP and different understandings of its intentions amongst stakeholders. Subjective meanings attached to the QEP by participants were influenced by distinct institutional cultures and traditions. Ideological discrepancies between the CHE and some institutions were also evident. Different understandings of theoretical orientations of transformation were evident in how at the merged university "they see transformation as of a technician nature" (Participant 17D) which differed from the CHE's theoretical lens.

I see some of the constructs, some of the terminology that they [CHE] use, and the people [theories] to whom they are referring. I am talking here about literature, then you can see that the tradition, the underpin-

ning assumptions, the points of departure, the paradigmatic framework is basically critical theory ... which might appeal to some people and not to others. Because not all universities are inclined towards such an approach. (Participant 17D: Merged University)

These conflicting ideological stances validate the argument that there were differences in understandings and assumptions regarding the QEP among stakeholders; hence, the compliance culture's dominance over enhancement which was expressed through an overwhelming better understanding of audit processes. These differences negatively impact on teaching and learning in terms of achieving the transformation goals of the curriculum.

The Impact of Globalisation and Policy Borrowing

It is evident that globalisation had a major influence on the QEP, as has been the case with most policy processes (Bowe et al., 1992). In modelling the QEP on the Scottish QEF, the CHE hoped to chart its aspirations for renewed vision and policy direction. The QEF was designed in line with the standards and guidelines for QE within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), as well as the Bologna Process, which acknowledges HEIs as autonomous bodies with full responsibility for maintaining quality and instilling a "culture of continuous QE" (Gvaramadze, 2008, p. 448) whilst acknowledging the benefits of QA. Moreover, stakeholders' involvement in the implementation of QA systems within HEIs is regarded as crucial, particularly students (ESG, 2015).

In South Africa, the influence of policy borrowing was seen in the CHE's adoption of the Scottish QEF principle of stakeholder-focused processes. However, lack of engagement with key stakeholders, particularly students, was a challenge in that input was not obtained on how they expected the policy to impact their learning. Student leaders from the traditional university and the university of technology expressed this concern.

I think most of the time especially in cases like this we are not really consulted. We are informed kind of to say, "this is the move that higher education will be taking, prepare yourself". (Participant 21A: University of Technology)

This view was echoed by the policy makers as a critical oversight, which ought to be addressed if a student-centred HE system is to be developed.

... It is a weakness in our system ... and one of the things that came out very clearly during that visit [to Scottish universities] was the important role that students play as partners in Scottish universities and also in assuring quality. We heard from a number of student leaders who said, "our role is to help ensure the best possible learning experience for students". So different from here. The DVCs [Deputy Vice-Chancellors]

were very impressed and we came back realising that we have a long, long way to go. It is certainly one of the things that we plan to pick up in the next QA cycle: how do we involve students more and how do we become more student-centric as institutions in what we do and how do we do it? (Participant 2A: CHE)

The CHE espoused the concept of collegiality by organising the DVCs: Teaching and Learning into peer forums to share best practice and validate its adoption of global practices:

There were two main influences on the design of the QEP. ... from Scotland the role played by DVCs and the importance of them being colleagues in the project was one of the most important things we learned. But also ... taking what is being learned and collating it so that you create resources for the sector was an important idea that we took from Scotland. (Participant 2A: CHE)

One of the other things we learned from Scotland in terms of the influence, the approach, was the idea of choosing focus areas because you cannot look at everything at the same time. (Participant 2A: CHE)

The CHE also borrowed the idea of "Achieving the Dream" from American QE frameworks (CHE, 2014b). The US model is based on a network of colleges in the United States of America. It aims to empower first-generation students from disadvantaged backgrounds who aspire to become graduates as a means of breaking the chains of poverty.

The other major influence was an initiative in the US called "Achieving the Dream", network of community colleges. The dream is student success, particularly for students who are first generation and from low income households which is the majority of students in South Africa. (Participant 2A: CHE)

These practices had a positive impact in that partnerships between South African and overseas institutions, such as Finnish and Scottish universities, and global networks were forged, resulting in collaborative practices, peer reviews and international benchmarking. This influenced the way stakeholders adapted foreign concepts to improve their QMSs. For instance, DVCs: Teaching and Learning visited ten Scottish universities to "interact with their Scottish peers" on i) "how to co-lead QE nationally", ii) "how to work together as a diverse higher education sector", iii) to "reflect on benefits and challenges of QE after 13 years" and "to see innovative teaching and learning spaces" (Grayson, 2015, p. 9). This enabled them to learn about QE frameworks and best practice models. One participant pointed to the value of collaboration:

I realised indeed our lecturers must be developed. ... I convinced the University to say, "Let's look into countries that are doing better in education". Finland came immediately [to mind]; the Finnish education

is the best in the world ... I said, now can we partner together [South Africa and Finland] to look into QEP? (Participant 10A: University of Technology)

Therefore, this partnership presented an opportunity for international collaboration and the upskilling of academics' pedagogical methods.

Transnational policy borrowing is based on neo-institutional beliefs that transfer and adaptation of policy locally is influenced by cultural and contextual dynamics (Steiner-Khamsi, 2014). For example, the Scottish "open space" concept which relates to creating socio-learning or indoor learning spaces, where students sit in "big lobbies and buildings" (Participant 14B) equipped with "some Wi-Fi, some computers against the walls" (Participant 14B), was perceived as a contextual misfit. Although the concept of QE adopted by the CHE for implementation by institutions was regarded as important and valuable, some participants criticised some aspects, for example "open spaces", as being irrelevant in the South African HE environment. According to Participant 14B, the open spaces in Scotland aim to address the challenge of students' absenteeism in the afternoon due to cold weather, while in South Africa, the weather is generally fine:

And I also think the entire country here [South Africa] has got the wrong idea about what they have done in Scotland. Here we have sunshine. Students can go and sit under a tree. (Participant 14B: Traditional University)

Thus, conflicts arise that hinder the transferability of cultural, localised or indigenisation of experiences.

To support this statement, conflicting situations were evident when the CHE solicited the services and expertise of a staff member at a Scottish university to coordinate the workshops with student leaders and institutions, which involved sharing information and strategies based on experiences in Scotland. The intention was to engage them on the new vision and policy direction the CHE was carving for South African HE. However, student leaders from the traditional university felt that the QEP had failed to address their issues because the Scottish facilitator was uninformed about the South African situation and lacked understanding of their realities and issues:

I think she should have first come to South Africa and observed the situation around the institutions then compared that research with [the] situation in Scotland and then come to a conclusion to say, "okay, this is what I think could help you". Not just to come from Scotland and just give us your model that you use in Scotland ... it's not gonna work ... because ...anything that you have given us was already a failure before it could be implemented because it wasn't fitting within the South African context. (Participant 19B: Traditional University)

Thus, while policy is recontextualised in different contexts and adapted to fit new environments (Bowe et al., 1992), the QEP, a concept borrowed from a developed country, was a simulation of foreign ideas. This argument juxtaposes northern (developed countries) and developing country realities to highlight the fallacy of policy transfer; thus, students advocated models that embody the realities of the African student.

In conclusion, this section discussed the local and global factors that propelled the shift from QA to QE. The failure of traditional audit systems was the most influential factor in triggering the process, while there were also attempts to institutionalise policy borrowing.

Context of Policy Text Production

The context of policy text production is where initial consultations, which facilitate the processes of policy development, uptake and implementation, take place between the policy makers and the policy implementers (Bowe et al., 1992). This involves decoding and recording (Bowe et al., 1992; Ball, Maguire, and Braun, 2012) to understand, translate and interpret policy texts. The QEP followed a consultative process; the participants confirmed that initial consultations took place between the CHE and management of the respective universities.

Consultation, or Lack Thereof, Between Policy Makers and Policy Implementers

The CHE's approach to consultation with top institutional management influenced the decisions taken within institutions regarding QEP uptake.

At the very beginning, we requested that Vice-Chancellors should appoint ... the Chief Academic Officer of the institution as the liaison person for the QEP, which is either a DVC: Teaching and Learning or a DVC: Academic. That would be the person that we communicate with at the institutions. (Participant 2A: CHE)

This statement indicates a lack of broader stakeholder consultation, which affected the quality of the input in the QEP processes at the bottom:

To what extent are we involving the junior lecturer? I don't know when the faculties went back and they had more collaborative processes but like the students, were they involved? They were not involved. Every staff member was not involved ... and a manager's perspective is very different from the lecturers' perspective ... like administration, which was key in student enrolment, their perspectives are different, you know, the people on the ground. (Participant 8A: University of Technology)

Students were also not involved in the process:

One of the things that came out very clearly ... "the important role that

students play as partners in Scottish universities and also in assuring quality” ... a number of student leaders said to us, “our role is to help ensure the best possible learning experience for students” ... The DVCs were very impressed and we all came back realising that we have a long, long way to go. It is certainly one of the things that we plan to pick up in the next QA cycle. How do we involve students more and how do we become more student-centric as institutions in what we do and how do we do it? (Participant 2A: CHE)

In this context of policy text production, power struggles ensued, with power and influence concentrated at the top at the expense of students and lecturers who were not involved. Students stated in the interviews that their voices were either not heard or were ignored.

The CHE, when it launched its project, I am not sufficiently convinced that the student voice was particularly heard or even solicited. (Participant 4B: DHET)

This is consistent with Bowe et al.’s (1992) theory, which holds that the voices of those at the bottom are marginalised by state apparatus (policy makers) which results in the top-down approaches discussed below.

Top-down Policy Approaches

According to Bowe et al. (1992), there is potential for conflict in the context of policy text production. Such conflict emanates from the interplay between various policy actors that have a stake in the process and have different interests to those espoused by the policy being formulated (Bowe et al., 1992). This influences the outcomes of policy implementation and is evident in the fact that the shift from QA to QE did not filter down to the bottom levels of institutions.

... we work directly with DVCs; it meant that the issues that were coming up with the QEP were being discussed and handled by a member of the executive management. That’s why we requested that they should be our contact people so that they got included in discussion at the very top level of the institution. In reality many DVCs decided, that they would appoint a QA manager as project manager for the QEP. ... In some institutions it was the Director: Teaching and Learning and in some institutions it was both. But in every case I can say that the role of the Director: Teaching and Learning was ...elevated to the QEP. (Participant 2A: CHE)

The CHE’s use of a top-down approach to obtain institutional buy-in resulted in a concentration of power in the top institutional echelons. The CHE reinforced its hierarchical position by awarding itself the role of overseeing the national policy agenda and policy implementation in institutions. This was contrary to the policy implementers’ interests, which

were focused on safeguarding their internal processes from external interference and control. This top-down approach increased mistrust among policy actors.

Lack of a Theory of Change

Effective implementation of change within an organisation or institution requires a sound theory of change, which involves planning a series of activities or interventions for the realisation of the intended change (Rogers, 2014).

Part of that was what I thought [is] underpinning the quality enhancement project, realising we are in a different space ... how the university responds, how they engage with teaching, learning, innovation and all of that. So I think part of that was [the need for] an underpinning knowledge and understanding that the world has changed. (Participant 4B: DHET)

There is always going to be a challenge no matter what system ... some of the critique that I have heard in the system is something about theory (Participant 1A: CHE)

These statements suggest a lack of theory to inform practice in the South African context. This disadvantaged the QEP in terms of policy planning, evaluation and monitoring, and understanding of how the policy works.

This section demonstrated how the lack of broader consultation among policy actors, coupled with the top-down approaches adopted by the policy makers to drive the QEP in institutions, resulted in confusion, contestation and power struggles and, in some instances, resistance on the ground, which is discussed in the following section.

Context of Practice

The context of practice is the setting in which policies are implemented. Implementation is based on stakeholders’ interpretations of policy. In response to the research question on how stakeholders implemented the QEP, diverse interpretations and different understandings of the nature of the QEP surfaced, which translated to different approaches to its implementation.

Approaches

The participants’ narratives reflected different perspectives on QEP implementation which resulted in different meanings and approaches to its implementation in the various institutions.

Obviously, [the QEP] it’s experienced differently across the sector ... I think there were a lot of DVCs that really got a lot out of it as DVCs, learned a lot and participated and others just said, “oh, ja, well I already

know [it] all". You have that. So I think it is experienced differently depending on the institution. (Participant 1A: CHE)

Some DVCs supported the change championed by the QEP, while others resisted it. Institutions that embraced the QEP used it to effect change and by embedding it in their institutional strategic plans, they ensured alignment with institutional missions as well as transformation. For instance, the management of the merged institution embraced the QEP as a new way of thinking that assisted them to finalise their restructuring and realignment processes, as well as to redefine themselves as a new institution following the merger:

The QEP came at a very best time in the history of the university because ...it helped towards ... finalising some of the things that were outstanding [in the merger processes] that were not clear. (Participant 16D: Merged University)

Management and participants from this institution regarded the QEP as more useful than QA in integrating the different cultures and languages in order to streamline processes so that a centralised and integrated entity could emerge.

However, competing priorities within this institution as well as tardy processes posed a challenge to the overall implementation of the QEP.

So now, at least there is clear direction though we are still working on a number of other things. (Participant 16D: Merged University)

Institutions that resisted change applied a tick-box approach to the implementation of the QEP based on their firm belief in accountability-driven systems. On the other hand, policy makers' strategies reinforced the hierarchical positioning of power instead of enforcing the required change.

Project Mentality

The way that policy makers conceptualised the QEP raises the question of what policy is. *Bowe et al. (1992, p. 13)* define policy as "the operational statements of values, statements of 'prescriptive intent'". In the realm of public policy, it is "an intentional course of action followed by a government institution or official for resolving an issue of public concern" (*Cochran, Mayer, Carr, Cayer, and McKenzie, 2015, p. 2*). The findings indicate that some of the participants perceived the QEP narrowly as a project rather than a policy.

Some policy implementers were of the view that only written policies and documented texts have the authority to regulate institutions. In general, stakeholders framed the QEP as a time-bound project which holds no long-term commitment to change. They perceived it as a mere trial-and-error exercise that lacks authority and is a forlorn attempt to bring about change in institutions.

The QEP's conceptualisation as a project rendered it open to various interpretations from the outset and it was perceived by most participants as merely an intervention to solve a problem. Hence, the majority of stakeholders did not acknowledge it as a CHE mandate and challenged its legality, arguing that it had not been formally legislated as policy. For instance, one participant from the comprehensive university argued that as a project it had no impact as a policy:

So what I see about the QEP is that by starting it as a project and you can see people in government here they like the word policy because once its policy there is no question. As a project its sounds extremely personal. Ja, it's like ..., "who is this now having a project on us?" You don't have the powers of enforcing a project but you have powers of enforcing a policy. (Participant 12C: Comprehensive University)

Another participant from the traditional merged institution elaborated on the time-bound nature of the programme, and the legal viewpoints held by some institutions regarding the CHE's mandate to implement the QEP:

... from what I hear and what I know [the] CHE is going back to institutional audits. And that should happen within the next year or two. Therefore ... some of those institutions that I spoke about were adamant ... I think that they still prefer that [audit] system and also they tried to be legalistic about it to ... say, "legally the institutional audits were established to be institutional audits". They were never established to be [a] quality enhancement thing. Therefore, it means that they [CHE] have moved away from their original mandate that they were given and they must continue doing their mandate. (Participant 15D: Merged University)

This superficial conception of the QEP led to a project mentality (*Israr, 2005; Meki-Kombe and Herman, 2017*) among most participants which prevented it from being implemented as intended. *Israr (2005)* defines a "project mentality" as the practices, behaviours, mind-sets and specific attitudes that different people possess that are negative towards any short-term initiative.

Consequently, a culture of indifference was created, as some role players perceived the QEP as a set of procedural rules that they had to comply with. They also felt that the QEP did not go far enough in cultivating a QE culture:

If you ask me, "how prepared was I for that particular thing?" I think to some extent it was just something that we needed to do ... because it was required for us to do. (Participant 15D: Merged University)

The project mentality negatively influenced stakeholders' attitudes towards learning more about the QEP. It demoralised some policy implementers as they lost confidence in the QEP as a change agent and lacked

conviction regarding its sustainability. Some policy implementers were discouraged from continuing to explore innovative ideas in the face of the myriad challenges and the intention to discontinue it. Abandoning policies before they materialise is a waste of resources and money. Conversely, there is a need for “institutionalising system change” to ensure the sustainability of innovative ideas and concepts (Adelman and Taylor, 2003), as well as to avoid tick-box exercises (discussed below) when implementing policies.

Tick-box Approach to Policy Implementation

During the implementation of the QEP, some policy implementers resorted to what Harvey and Williams (2010) describe as tick-box exercises instead of embracing change. A participant from the traditional merged institution explained the reasons for this:

I guess we are doing some of these things to comply with the system and sometimes we are doing them because they fall within the realm of the work that we normally would be doing. (Participant 15D: Merged University)

This response highlights the perpetuation of a long-standing compliance-oriented tradition and a lack of common understanding among stakeholders, including faculty and students, regarding how the QEP was understood and implemented. For instance, as noted earlier, different understandings that emerged between policy makers and policy implementers regarding the intent of the QEP, its purpose and meaning led some policy implementers to resort to the old habit of ticking boxes merely to comply with requirements, as opposed to gaining institutional buy-in:

... have people correctly conceptualised what it [the QEP] is and what it means and do they understand what quality enhancement means and was there buy-in or was it just “oh okay, we going to do this” but really, ... was there a clear road map? (Participant 4B: DHET)

The findings thus indicate that the QEP was not understood due to lack of understanding of QE and was approached as a compliance exercise. This is tantamount to the subversion of the transformation ideals that were desperately needed.

Insufficient Funding and Human Resources

Any meaningful educational change is resource hungry (Fullan and Miles, 1992). The majority of the participants, including policy makers indicated that insufficient funds and resources were the major challenges experienced in the implementation of the QEP:

The other big problem that we have is that our universities’ student numbers have doubled but the money given to the universities has not increased anything like as much so universities are under incredibly

tight financial constraints, which impacts on everything they do and most critically on the staff that they are able to hire. (Participant 2A: CHE)

Similarly, a participant from the traditional university indicated that they were not financially prepared for QEP implementation. Unlike the traditional audits, QEP implementation involved travel and logistical expenses as participants were expected to travel to other institutions to develop sound practice guidelines. This translated to extra financial and person power demands to specifically cater for the QEP, which institutions did not have.

Personally I refused because we didn’t have funding that will assist us in doing that [QEP arrangements and logistics] ... You know, ... a lot of logistical elements ... also come into play ... So it is important to have an understanding to say, “well, here is funding responsibly or specifically to fund this specific project”. (Participant 13B: Traditional University)

A similar trend regarding human resources was observed by a participant from the university of technology.

So if we talked human resources, infrastructure resources ...that required an institutional decision or prioritisation to allocate additional resources to us which was never done ... and the changes that need to be made we don’t have the resources to implement those. (Participant 8A: University of Technology)

Not only did institutions’ limited funds constrain implementation, but the CHE’s Quality Audit Unit also struggled to administer the QEP due to insufficient staff:

The Directorate is called Institutional Audits, as I said we have been doing the QEP during this period... and I have a small staff who are able to help. In fact, it is very small, there is only four of them. (Participant 2A: CHE)

Unstable Higher Education Climate

Over the past few years, the South African HE system has been hit by a wave of student protests against increased tuition fees and for free, quality HE (Jansen, 2017). These disruptive protests had a negative impact on strategies, plans and initiatives aimed at meeting student needs and capacity building, and eventually all parties had to renegotiate and readjust schedules and activities.

And we almost at the end of phase 1. ...the next idea was to go into phase 2 which is to focus on curriculum [transformation]. But many of the institutions said that, “We had such a bad year last year with the student protests and all of that; please, can we just postpone this a little while?” (Participant 1A: CHE)

Bowe et al. (1992) suggest that broader stakeholder engagement and consensus reduce conflict. However, lack of institutional capacity and stakeholder engagement to mitigate this crisis led to failed attempts to implement the QEP as initially intended and threatened the mandate to drive a national policy agenda.

Discussion and Conclusion

This article demonstrates the complexities of policy implementation in South African HE. The study's findings reveal diverse stakeholder understandings and experiences of QEP implementation in the four participating institutions.

In the context of influence, a lack of common understanding of the shift from QA to QE led to the perpetuation of a compliance culture in the implementation of the QEP. The policy implementers' narrow definition of policy, which was limited to official written texts or documents to enforce authority and accountability in institutions, was far removed from the QEP's intention of transformation. At the project level, few people were involved in supporting the implementation strategy due to a lack of common understanding of the nature of the QEP. While the CHE framed the QEP as imperative for redress and equity issues, transformation, and social justice, it did not define it as policy, which contradicted the very essence of its action and intent – as a tool for social change or transforming the HE system. Clear policy guidelines on what constitutes policy were necessary, to foster a common understanding that the QEP is policy – considering that any intentional act of government for resolving an issue of public concern is policy (Cochran, Mayer, Carr, Cayer and McKenzie, 2015). Without guidelines, the QEP was open to different interpretations and experiences that influenced its implementation at institutional level:

So there were no guidelines ...it depends a lot on how I interpret what enhancement is ... it is subject to multiple interpretations and multiple understandings of exactly what to do because when you come up with a project of this nature it requires a lot of consultation so that, people [understand], “we have the basic minimums of what we are calling enhancement”. (Participant 12C: Comprehensive University)

Policy borrowing added to the challenges. Despite its achievements, the Scottish model was mired in challenges, including inadequate training of middle managers in their new role of mediation during the implementation phase (Saunders and Sin, 2015). The limitations of the QEF in Scotland signalled important lessons to consider when conceptualising the QEP implementation framework. Yet South African policy makers were seemingly oblivious to these challenges, partly due to a lack of prior research to determine the feasibility of the project in the South African context, as

more attention was focused on pushing the policy agenda (Sosibo, 2014).

In the context of policy text production, policy processes demonstrated a trajectory towards New Public Management (NPM) to drive institutional effectiveness and efficiency as well as policy reforms. This is linked to state (external) apparatus employing neoliberalism and market ideologies to influence institutional governance matters, including decision making and QE in institutions (Rosa and Teixeira, 2014). Broucker, De Wit, and Verhoeven (2018) argue that NPM offers limited opportunities for real policy reform outcomes due to its accountability-led principles and lack of broader perspectives and consultative processes. This involves both internal and external stakeholder discourses that define the value and purpose of HE and policy reforms. This argument is consistent with the finding that the exclusionary consultative processes employed by the CHE led to bureaucratic, top-down processes and resistance from within institutions. It is corroborated by Rosa and Teixeira's (2014) findings emanating from four Portuguese HEI case studies that revealed different viewpoints between and among internal and external stakeholders' perspectives regarding their presence. Activism compounded the existing tensions. The theoretical implication is that broader consultative processes should be ensured in the context of policy text production aimed at forging common understandings of the QEP. This will assist in eliminating conflict and power struggles, as well as resistance and indifference at the bottom. This finding contributes to theory based on lessons learned from a lack of inclusive consultative processes, which threatened the principles of collegiality, collaboration and ownership that policy makers initially envisioned.

Finally, in the context of practice, although the shift from QA to QE was justified to drive the transformative agenda, the conceptualisation and implementation of the QEP was unsustainable. The study's findings indicated that institutions employed different approaches and strategies to implement the QEP, partly due to a lack of understanding of this initiative and what was expected of them. This resulted in the overwhelmingly dominance of a tick-box (compliance) culture based on fear within institutions of the consequences of not complying with regulatory requirements. Moreover, the brewing tensions across the system reflected the undercurrent of political instability that influenced policy makers' decisions.

In addition, numerous issues point to insufficient preparation and planning which, according to Al Hasani and Al Omiri (2017), leads to resistance to change. Other findings were the lack of a monitoring mechanism and limited resources to support this initiative. This finding is consistent with Seniwoliba and Yakubu's (2015) Ghanaian case study, which also pointed to a lack of funding of QA processes. The overwhelming majority of the

participants across all four case studies and the policy makers indicated that this was a major challenge.

A critical finding was the presence of a project mentality (Israr, 2005), considering that a mere fraction of policy implementers strived for change, while others were oblivious of the QEP or were simply disinterested, and the majority simply complied with CHE requirements, regarding them as the norm and the QEP as a mere project. This affected the sustainability of the QEP. It is important that new policies are sustainable in view of the wastage of funds and resources that will result if this is not the case. In other words, the move from traditional audits to enhancement was not implemented as intended, as the QEP was unsustainable.

In conclusion, we argue that the sustained growth of the QE sector requires that trusting relationships are forged among stakeholders in order to steer the HE system towards self-sustaining processes. Of critical importance is the role played by stakeholders in these processes, particularly policy implementers.

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