EVALUATING A QUALITY ASSURANCE INSTRUMENT IN THE ADVENT OF REMOTE TEACHING, LEARNING AND WORKING ENVIRONMENTS

Luvuyo Lumkile Lalendle, Refiloe Tsephe, Inderasan Naidoo

University of South Africa (SOUTH AFRICA)

Abstract

Quality Evaluation Instruments (QEIs) are used to assess quality against predefined codes of practice and standards that are built on Quality Management (QM) principles. The University of South Africa (UNISA) Quality Evaluation Instrument (UQEI) was developed and implemented in 2011 as a pilot project and in 2013 it was rolled-out for an institution-wide implementation. Ten years thereafter, the University decided to review the instrument and an external panel of experts in planning and quality assurance was appointed. The University sought this external review to ascertain whether the instrument is achieving on its intended purpose. Furthermore, to evaluate the alignment of the UQEI to the Council on Higher Education (CHE) quality criteria for accreditation, audits, and quality reviews. In addition, within the ambit of the external review is the suitability of the instrument in assuring the quality of the student learning experience in institutional arrangements as they pertain to the academic project and learner support. The UQEI external review was conducted as a desktop review and occurred in tandem with a virtual site visit. The latter was to allow the panel to interview key stakeholders to gain more insight on the implementation of the UQEI at UNISA. The review methodology was guided by the criteria of inclusiveness, coherence, effectiveness, accountability, and innovation. Other identified areas included having a QEI that is responsive to the new COVID-19 context, an instrument that takes cognisance of the need to fast track the implementation of the online facets of the business model. These called for reimagining practices at the University and to better manage quality within the academic, professional and support environments. The revisions of the UQEI had to be congruent with the changing higher education regulatory environment in South Africa and with universal practices globally. In South Africa, the CHE has a new Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) promulgated in 2021 that currently guides provisioning of quality programmes in and within the post-COVID-19 higher education context. Findings and recommendations were that the institution must involve students, academic staff, and non-academic staff, in articulating an institutional understanding of a quality student learning experience. UNISA would need to establish a link between improving student-learning experience and improving student outcomes. The UQEI review overall outcome was that the instrument is compact, integrated, comprehensive and encapsulates a wide range of the University’s synergized operations. Moreover, there seems to be an effective alliance and relationship between the UQEI, institutional policies, strategy, and national imperatives.

Keywords: Quality evaluation instrument, higher education, quality assurance, distance education.

1 INTRODUCTION

The UNISA Quality Evaluation Instrument (UQEI) was developed and implemented in 2011 to monitor and evaluate the quality of UNISA’s academic offerings and support services on an annual basis. It was also meant to determine areas in need of focused attention to bring about improvement, enhancement, and development. The institution’s UQEI aims to assess the quality of teaching and learning at modular level within a given annual cycle.

The UQEI has been reviewed internally annually by the University in conjunction with all internal stakeholders. In 2020, there were calls to consider a review of the instrument by an external panel. Its critics expressed reservations pertaining to its fitness for purpose. In the same year, a senate committee decided that those responsible for QA, along with other stakeholders, should discuss the matter and submit a proposal for the external review of the instrument. At that time, it was clear that all stakeholders believed that the UQEI needed to be reviewed and be aligned to other quality assurance instruments that are used to determine the quality of teaching, learning, assessment, and student support at the University. The external review of the UQEI was intended to bring about
coherence and effectiveness to all Institutional Quality Assurance systems that ensure the provision of an exceptional learning experience – one that promotes student access and success.

The Department of Quality Assurance took the responsibility in organising the external review of the UQEI and the resultant provision of external recommendations on how the model can be enhanced to effect its purpose. The comprehensive, reflective, and transparent evaluation report with recommendations for simplification and improvement of the UQEI submitted by the Chair of the UQEI Review Panel in consultation with the external panel is of utmost importance to the success, value, and further use of the instrument.

UNISA, a dedicated comprehensive university, was the first university in the African continent to offer tertiary distance education. UNISA’s Program Qualification Mix (PQM) comprises of more than three thousand (3 000) modules. In the first iteration of the UQEI, the module was used as the unit of analysis and a student-centric evaluation tool was developed, piloted from 2011 to 2012 and reached maturity in 2013. The UQEI was effectively implemented for a five-year period and then commissioned for an external review. The research report of [1] (Hendenrych, 2005) formed the foundation of the UQEI and served as exploratory research for the development of the criteria, quality standards and measuring instruments. Furthermore, in [2] (CHE, 2004) the CHE provided the Higher Education Quality Committee’s (HEQC) criteria and minimum standards for the accreditation of academic programmes which became a resource document in the development of the UQEI. Compliance with other role players in the regulatory and statutory organisations is provided for in [2] (CHE, 2004) which was integral in the development of the UQEI.

The provision of educational quality is premised on the stakeholders that the Higher Education Institution (HEI) service and institutional staff need to understand their role as stakeholders that ensure that high quality services are offered to students. Hence, the institution provides structured capacity development programmes for the academic and support staff. Within the UNISA context, these cut across all processes reflected on the UNISA Student Walk. The CHE classifies the quality landscape using four categories:

1) Input
2) Process
3) Output & Impact and
4) Review.

The next category of stakeholders and the “key participants and responsible stakeholders in the renewal of higher education” is the student as emphasized in [3] (Palomores, 2012). Studies, for example, those in [4] (Elassy, 2013) and [5] (Raharjo, Xie, Goh, & Brombacher, 2007), indicate the importance of student involvement in the QA processes. To advance the debate on quality assurance in higher education, the authors in [6] (Moyo & Boti, 2020) argued the importance of the students’ construction of the socio-cultural climate of their learning experience. The third category of stakeholders are the prospective employers and the communities in which the outcomes of teaching and learning will be experienced and used for socio-economic development and as change agents for future development and economic growth.

Assuring the quality of education is a fundamental aspect of gaining and maintaining credibility for programmes, institutions, and national higher education systems worldwide. UNISA accentuates the HEQC definition of quality through the work of [7] (Inglis, 2005) wherein quality assurance is defined as a process oriented to guaranteeing that the quality of a module meets some predetermined standard. In [8] (ENQA, 2009), the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) alludes to the following principles for Internal Quality Assurance (IQA), cited by [9] (Tsinidou, Gerogiannis, & Fitsilis, 2010):

1) Define the policy and procedures for quality assurance of the quality and standards of their programmes and awards, including their systematic review. Institutions need to adopt a culture of quality improvement in all aspects of their educational product.
2) Assessment of students using published criteria, regulations and procedures that are consistently applied.
3) Quality assurance of teaching staff, facilities, and resources.
4) Data processing of information collected through surveys and other sources for the effective management of the institution and customer service.
5) Objective and up-to-date information available to the public about a variety of issues such as degrees and awards offered, financial data, quality assessments etc.
The size and shape of a HEI is a key driver in the design of a QEI and the disruptions brought by the COVID-19 pandemic and overnight decisions for lockdowns changed the education sector drastically [10] (Rughoobur-Seetah & Hosanoo, 2021). This, for UNISA, happened at a time when the UQEI was due for review to test its adequacy for the purpose it intended to serve. Thus, the COVID-19 scenario presented an opportunity for the University to think beyond educational norms and standards. The need to broaden the QA spectrum was realized.

New models for consideration of quality in higher education should take cognisance of the work of [10] (Rughoobur-Seetah & Hosanoo, 2021) that defines eight criteria into which quality in higher education could be modelled. The review of the UQEI and the recommendations were applied in the ideation of a revised instrument. The design of the revised UQEI adapted the exemplar in [5] (Raharjo, Xie, Goh, & Brombacher, 2007) and an 8-dimensional model was developed in 2022 that the new UQEI will use as presented below in Fig.1.

![Figure 1: UQEI 8 Quality Dimensions](image-url)

2 METHODOLOGY

The review of the UQEI was conceptualized and executed as a study that was premised within a qualitative paradigm. The population of the study was all stakeholders who were responsible for assuring, managing, and receiving services from various portfolios within the University, including all university staff and students.

2.1 Sampling

The sampling technique was purposive and targeted quality assurance and enhancement practitioners within the academic and support sectors of the University. The review itself followed a peer review methodology where a three-member panel from a select group of quality assurance and planning specialists in South Africa and Namibia were appointed through the statutory structures of the University. The panel conducted a comprehensive desktop review of the relevant UQEI documents that included the UNISA Quality Policy, the UQEI stakeholder maps (online survey questionnaires), student participation in Best Reflective Practices, the UNISA Integrated Quality Management and Assurance Framework (IQMAF), and Quality Review Reports and Improvement Plans that spanned over the five-year period 2014-2018.

2.2 Evaluation criteria/areas

The UQEI review criteria agreed upon by the panel and the institution were adopted from the UNISA Commonwealth of Learning Audit framework developed in 2019 for the institutional trial audit. The five areas of the review were Inclusiveness, Coherence, Effectiveness, Accountability, and Innovation.
The criteria on Inclusiveness deals with the people aspects and in [11] (Ferdousi, Ahmed, & Momen, 2022) it is alluded that the selection of the learning programmes is based on the decisions of significant stakeholders of quality. The primary stakeholders are the students [3] (Palomores, 2012). The importance of students’ involvement in QA processes is well documented in [4] (Elassy, 2013) and [5] (Raharjo, Xie, Goh, & Brombacher, 2007). The importance of the students’ constructions of the socio-cultural climate of their learning experience to advance the debate on quality of higher education is detailed in [6] (Moyo & Boti, 2020). The next category of stakeholders comprises internal staff and structures of the HEI. In the case study in [11] (Ferdousi, Ahmed, & Momen, 2022), it is mandatory that decisions regarding new programmes must pass through the institutional governance structures to ensure the programme and qualification as mandated by the statutory and regulatory structures and these must be planned for. The third category of stakeholders are the external stakeholders, the prospective employers, and the communities. Their expectation is that the graduate attributes will contribute to the socio-economic upliftment of communities, future professional development, and economic growth towards a knowledge-based economy.

The criterion on Coherence gives an account of how the IQA practices are aligned to the University’s quality policy and programme/plans. The Criteria for Programme Accreditation in [2] (CHE, 2004) highlights the importance of using the quality concept while developing and implementing policies, systems, processes, and procedures in a HEI to enhance the effectiveness of the institution. The CHE in [2] (CHE, 2004) classifies the quality landscape using the four categories 1) Input, 2) Process, 3) Output & Impact, and 4) Review. There is an inherent need for the UQEI to be responsiveness to the national regulated QA system and requirements together with the shared sense and vision on IQA within the Institution. Fig. 1 resonates very well with the four CHE quality categories and the UNISA Student Walk is visible in the revised model. It is paramount that mechanisms for feedback is triangulated across all stakeholders and that will lead to the most effective improvement initiatives which occur when IQA processes mesh with External Quality Assurance (EQA) activities. This is elaborated in [12] (Rathee & Rajain, 2013).

The Effectiveness of quality assurance activities, according to [12] (Rathee & Rajain, 2013) can be clustered into three major groups, namely, pre-education (student recruitment), education (teaching and learning processes), and post-education (graduate placement and alumni support). The UQEI design must ensure the quality of service at the three clusters are aligned to both IQA and EQA activities to allow for the efficacy of the delivery of a holistic and integrated academic project. The outcomes of the evaluation must be used to improve the quality of service to students, “where institutions have acted on the basis of what the students have said in their annual feedback surveys, student satisfaction can be seen to rise” as concluded in [13] (Williams, 2016). Furthermore, how does the model address the concerns raised in the application of the model through feedback systems and practices by the stakeholders, thereby ensuring the continued effectiveness of the OQEI? In [14] (Harvey & Newton, 2004) it is purported that “While talking about the quality of the learner experience, most approaches seem to examine the provision” thereby loosing track of the fundamental objects of the QA system and its intended role for students. In [11] (Ferdousi, Ahmed, & Momen, 2022) it is appealed that the effectiveness of QA can give rise to increased recognition, employability, and satisfaction of stakeholders, this is an important aspect for ensuring a reputable brand.

In [13] (Williams, 2016) Accountability is defined as a primary process that provides information to external stakeholders about the extent to which an implemented QA principle can provide useful institutional data that informs quality improvement processes. This implies that institutions should endeavour to make greater use of QA practices to provide better services, thereby enhancing the institution’s image. In [14] (Harvey & Newton, 2007), on the other hand, it is suggested that accountability is aligned to the degree of autonomy an institution has, cost of education massification and to account for public expenditure. [14] (Harvey & Newton, 2007) further reflects on accountability to students as another aspect to ensure that there is assurance that students receive comparable education. Quality monitoring and quality improvement are important aspects that should ensure that quality initiatives are implemented and [14] (Harvey & Newton, 2007) warns that quality processes are not only providing enhanced documentation but must provide convincing evidence that improvement takes place. [11] (Ferdousi, Ahmed, & Momen, 2022) summarised improvement by indicating that

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1 Refers to the internal and external stakeholders including governing council members, management team members, senior academic and students who are part of QA activities [2] (CHE, 2004)
when top management understands the benefits of assuring quality, then there will be meaningful accountability and quality leadership. The role of quality governance structures is an integral part to ensure that academic offerings have been presented and approved at all levels.

In [11] (Ferdousi, Ahmed, & Momen, 2022), [12] (Rathee & Rajain, 2013) and [14] (Harvey & Newton, 2007) the myriad of challenges facing HE are elucidated. These are, namely, limited access to tertiary education, insufficient information and communication technology, new technologies, borderless education, new forms of governance, and increased cost of higher education. The disruptions brought about by the COVID-19 have further put pressure on HE to be innovative, as they think of ways and environments conducive to digitised teaching and learning processes. In [11] (Ferdousi, Ahmed, & Momen, 2022) the need for the use of advanced communication technology as a unique tool in the ODL context is advocated. This suggests that QA systems must be technologically driven, and this mechanism will facilitate the provision of quality feedback closer to the occurrence of the performance gaps identified. For a QEI to be innovative, it must have unique features, related systems, and practices compared to industry standards.

2.3 Data collection

The virtual site visit was conducted over a three-day period in January 2021. The interview sessions were discursive in nature, lasted just under two hours with a minimum of six participants, and a maximum of ten participants in each session. The panel conducted semi-structured interviews with select groups of stakeholders who were practitioners in both the support and academic environments. The questions were posed to cover all the five areas that guided the review. The stakeholders interviewed were Executive Management, Executive Deans and School Directors, Chairs of Departments, Quality Heads, Executive Directors, Quality Champions, Quality Assurance and Promotion staff, Regional Directors, student formations and students. The data collected from the interview sessions pointed to the complex nature of the UQEI and its capabilities of yielding information that goes beyond teaching and learning as evidenced by data covering issues that pertain to support services, finance, human capital, and student support services.

2.4 Data presentation

The panel presented the report with 16 recommendations on what the university should embark on to improve the efficacy of the instrument. These ranged from how inclusivity could be improved by broadening the scope of reach with respect to international students, finding ways to monitor the learning experiences of those who reside outside South African borders, and the need to align the instrument to the ever-changing quality regulatory environment in South Africa and elsewhere.

2.5 Socialization process

The review report was workshopped with the eight university portfolios, QA governance structures and management to disseminate the outcomes of the review process. Follow-up workshops with university stakeholders were further conducted to develop capacity on standards development and the need for the review of quality management systems to ensure the infusion of the outcomes of the review to QA operational imperatives. Various portfolios participated in the socialization workshops. 175 staff members participated in these sessions that lasted for three hours. There were identified areas for focused attention based on the 16 recommendations from the panel, which included having a quality assurance and enhancement instrument that is responsive to the Open Distance E-Learning context of the University. The eight university portfolios were engaged to develop or update their quality standards for incorporation into the revised or new UQEI. This process was done over a two-month period in 2022. Follow-up workshops with university stakeholders were further conducted to develop capacity on standards development and to communicate the need for a review of quality management systems to ensure the infusion of outcomes of the review to QA operational imperatives.

3 RESULTS

The panel made several recommendations that urged the University to ensure that the UQEI takes cognizance of the lessons learnt from the COVID-19 pandemic. The panel recommended that the University fast track the implementation of the online facets of the business model. The panel also emphasized the need to focus more on streamlining the instrument so that it focuses on managing quality within the professional and support university environment. The University was advised to
consider a different instrument to deal with module review. The revised instrument should reflect and be relevant to the new norm of a changing higher education context by accommodating remote teaching and learning as well as remote working. In terms of the five evaluation areas, the most significant finding was on enhancing coherence and integration between Module and Programme Reviews standards. A major area that the review brought to the fore was in respect to the student experience. The UQEI revisions needed to take cognizance of the following:

1) The institution must involve students, academic staff, and non-academic staff in articulating an institutional understanding of a quality student learning experience.

2) Establishing links between improving student learning experience and improving student outcomes.

There was a call to broaden the UQEI to accommodate an evaluation of student performance and its links to a holistic student learning experience. The student total learning experience must be clearly articulated and should consist of standards that distinguish the academic and non-academic student experience. The result of the review points out the need to developing independent learning as an attribute and skill that is important for student success in distance learning institutions. It articulates the need for the institution to focus on making students aware that when they enroll at UNISA, independent learning is an essential skill for their success at the university. The UQEI review overall outcome was that the instrument is compact, integrated, comprehensive and encapsulates a wide range of the University’s synergized operations. Moreover, there seems to be an effective alliance and relationship between the UQEI, institutional policies, strategy, and national imperatives.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The UQEI review process brought several take-home lessons for the University. These pointed out the need to consider the international footprint of the University and the varied student experiences due to distance and contexts. The review panel emphasised the need to focus on the students’ lived experiences, which is an area that needs focused attention by the University using a multiplicity of instruments and interventions. The development of new quality standards for each portfolio after the COVID-19 pandemic came at an opportune time for the university as remote teaching and working has intensified and thus required new ways of managing quality and student experiences. The revisions in the UQEI will now be congruent with the changing higher education regulatory environment in South Africa and universal practices globally. In South Africa, the CHE has a new Quality Assurance Framework (QAF), promulgated in 2021 in [11] (CHE, 2021), which currently guides provisioning of quality programmes in a COVID-19 context and within the post-COVID-19 higher education context. The University is optimistic that the UQEI will continue to be innovative in its approach and exploit the improved technology adoption across the University.

REFERENCES


