



Peer Review and the Dilemmas of Quality Control in Programme Accreditation in South African Higher Education: Challenges and Possibilities

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The paper scrutinises the dynamics and the nature of peer review in the programme evaluation and accreditation process within the context of diverse individual and institutional legacies in South Africa. It analyses the peer review process and highlights the contestation at political, policy and epistemological levels. The paper argues that, although the diversity of the review teams very often led to consensus based more on political compromises than on sound professional and academic grounds, all participants experienced the process as educative — offering conceptual and practical opportunities for development. It points to the need for problematisation of peer review and for a critical examination of its possibilities and limits in programme review.

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Introduction

This paper discusses the concept of peer review in the context of programme evaluation and accreditation in South African higher education. It was inspired by the national reviews of teacher education undertaken by the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) of the Council on Higher Education (CHE) in 2005 in South Africa (SA). Under the general umbrella of review of teacher education, the reviews focused mainly on master of education (MEd) programmes in education leadership and management (ELM). According to the CHE, the reasons for choosing the MEd (ELM) included ‘not only the large number of enrolments in this area but also the complexity of the variants of specializations that could be broadly clustered under Education Leadership and Management descriptor’ (CHE, 2010, vii). In 2005, these programmes catered for a total of 987 master’s degree students



countrywide. The review process was completed in 2007, and a final report of the reviews released in August 2010.

The paper argues that, although peer review proved to be an effective strategy in quality assuring academic programmes, the lack of consensus among the diverse reviewers with regard to what constitutes high academic standards, what epistemologies are appropriate, what counts as knowledge and good practice in a particular academic programme, highlighted some of its challenges and possibilities.

Micropolitics, Voice and Silence

This paper draws on critical sociological perspectives that foreground interests, power and power relations as mediators and sometimes drivers of human interactions. Meighan and Harber (2007) note that although individuals derive benefit from being in groups, such affiliations are not always harmonious. Individuals and sub groups may pursue their own interests over the interests of other individuals and groups.

Where these [interests] do not compete, a peaceful pluralism can be accomplished; however where there is competition some management of conflict becomes necessary ... and it is in these circumstances that the notion of power becomes crucial(Meighan and Harber, 2007, 318)

The use of power is crucial in managing intra-group and inter-group conflict. The management of intra-group conflict refers to 'the power of individuals to shape, direct and define the objectives and practices of others in the group' and the management of inter-group conflict refers to the 'ability of informal and formalized associations of individuals to successfully overcome opposition from other groups or individuals' (Meighan and Harber, 2007, 318). This is not to suggest that conflict rather than consensus, conflictive rather than cooperative action, dominates peer review. The legacy of racism, discrimination and academic marginalisation, which still divides the academic community in SA, necessitated an analytical framework rooted in the conflict theory of social action.

To understand the nature of and management of conflict in social groups, we use the concept of micropolitics. Micropolitics has been defined as 'the use of formal and informal power by individuals and groups to achieve their goals in organizations' (Blasé, 1998, 545), by altering the behaviour of others or influencing them. For the purpose of this paper, we consider a particular form of micropolitics, which embodies, in a multi-layered way, Foucault and Gordon's (1980) analysis of knowledge and power in the context of fierce discursive and epistemological contestation. Highly celebrated in the micro-political domain is the presence of 'voice', which, in Bourdieu's (1994) terms,

reinforces the symbolic power of language in social communication or interaction (e.g. by privileging certain forms of knowledge, competencies and approach to quality, or by controlling meetings and circulation of information, etc.). In this sense, *voice* is an important form of micropolitical expression (Pillay, 2004, 132). The same can be said about the absence of voice or *silence*. It can be a vehicle through which important messages can be communicated and as such a form of action. To stress, however, that, beyond its manipulative connotations, micropolitics can be a productive, generative and positive force with positive outcomes.

Against the legacy of apartheid, peer review in programme accreditation in SA takes place within a highly politicised academic environment, where political concerns very often prevail over professional concerns. In this regard, we use the concept of stakeholder rooted in the representative democracy discourse to demarcate the nature of peer review panels in programme accreditation from journal peer review (Jongbloed and Goedegebuure, 2001, 9). As much as we share with Foucault (Foucault and Gordon, 1980), the claim that knowledge is power we also acknowledge with the necessary precautions Weiss (1988, 37) warning that in policy ‘power is power’ to highlight the dominance of politics, which very often tend to overshadow professional concerns. ‘Knowledge’, she argues, ‘is adjunct; it’s not the star of the show; it’s only a supporting actor — sometimes a bit of player’. In such a context, power is dispersed, indeterminate, heteromorphous — relational or exercised from innumerable points, subject less — independent of conscious subjects (Foucault and Gordon, 1980, 102). It can be paralyzing or productive depending on the strategic choices and decisions made by the reviewers.

Methodology

The paper is based on an analysis of policy documents, reports and observations during the review processes, conversations with reviewers in formal and informal settings and own participation in the process. In this regard, the method used in this study could be described as *participant research* (McMillan and Schumacher, 2006, 345), which involves a combination of multiple data collection strategies, namely participation, observation, interviews and document analysis. The lead author was both a member of different review panels and an author of an institutional report of one of the programmes under review. The second author participated in several course and programme reviews at institutional level. The roles of participant and researcher are played simultaneously, and require the researcher to have constant self-awareness about whose voice is being recorded as data. Because the data contain the researchers’ reflections on their experiences, as well as those



of other participants, the dual role of participant and researcher must be exceedingly sensitive regarding which voice is represented in the study (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006, 345). Observations involved direct participation, judgment and recording of field notes. Interviews took the form of casual conversations after a review activity and more formal interviews with selected individuals.

The bulk of the information came, however, from document analysis: documents on the evaluation criteria; guidelines on the review process; documentation for the training workshops; institutional programme evaluation reports; documents on regulative rules and procedures governing academic programmes; samples of student work; documents on assessment and examination procedures; lists of internal and external examiners and their profiles; profiles of staff (with details on qualifications, research and teaching records, professional experience, etc.); individual reflections of the reviewers; and the reports of the panels. Of particular significance is the CHE (2010) final report on the national reviews. For the purpose of confidentiality, the identities of the institutions and individuals have not been revealed.

An interpretative approach rooted in hermeneutic phenomenology, which acknowledges the significance of personal interpretation and informed judgment was adopted. On the basis of this mode of analysis, we drew on the lived experiences and insights arising from our participation as peer reviewers who engaged on numerous occasions with other reviewers and peers, mentors or advisers who have inducted peers into review activities, and authors of review reports on our own programmes. Of importance was also the use of autobiographical referencing in data selection. By autobiographical referencing, we refer to the degree to which the experience from our participation in programme reviews (institutional- or CHE-driven) formed a basis for gaining deeper insights into the issues discussed in this paper.

Programme Accreditation: Concept, Conceptions and Processes

Programme accreditation is a form of quality assurance usually associated with accountability, improvement in programme quality and with maintaining standards in core academic activities (Materu, 2007). Programme accreditation is also connected to 'multiple stakeholder demands for greater responsiveness to societal needs through enhanced student access and mobility, through research and innovation that address social and economic development, and through engagement with local, regional and international communities of interest' (HEQC/CHE, 2004, 1; see also Jongbloed and Goedegebuure, 2001). At the institutional level, accreditation is a mechanism through which programme providers assert their visions and determine their programme identities

as active participants in knowledge production, dissemination and utilisation, through specific strategies of programme design and delivery. Through it, they demonstrate and justify how they select, validate and institutionalise knowledge, how they package and communicate this knowledge to meet societal needs, and what norms, procedures and standards they embrace to regulate these processes.

However, programme accreditation in SA is also driven by the need to be responsive to the national vision for higher education articulated in the various policy and legislative documents. Its main features include increased participation, greater responsiveness and increased cooperation and partnerships. Increased participation is to be achieved through an expansion of student enrolments and programme offerings, guided by the principles of equity and redress. Responsiveness to societal needs requires engagement with the challenges posed by the apartheid legacy: elimination of racial discrimination and oppression, and promotion of equity, social justice and equal opportunity. At an epistemological level, concerns with responsiveness are symptomatic of a shift from closed knowledge systems (driven by canonical norms of traditional disciplines) to more open knowledge systems with a greater trans-disciplinary, trans-faculty and trans-institutional programme mix (NCHE, 1996, 6–7). This vision is reflected in the general conception, organisation, processes and most importantly evaluation criteria and standards of programme review.

Conceptualising Peer Review in Programme Review and Accreditation

Broadly, peer review can be described as the systematic examination and assessment of an academic activity by peers with the ultimate goal of helping the reviewed to improve practice and comply with established standards and principles regulating academic work within a given system of accountability. An important function of peer review is to monitor and enhance compliance by academic practitioners with nationally and internationally agreed upon standards. It has gained prominence as one of the means of knowledge validation in scholarly work and most importantly in academic publications. Its significance has now been extended to different domains such as quality control in social, political and economic fields (e.g. the OECD and the African peer review mechanisms). Trust, credibility and commitment are critical to the process.

The strengths and weaknesses of peer review have been the object of several studies (Weller, 2002 and Schmelkin, 2003). On the positive side, peer review can perform several important functions. We draw these from current literature on peer review in the political and development arena (Sack, 2003).



It opens and extends spaces for dialogue among academic practitioners that can impact on institutional policies and practices. It promotes transparency in that it invites the reviewed to backtrack, track and reflect on their practices, as well as to present and clarify their goals, rules, procedures and practices. Peer review also allows for mutual individual and organisational learning in which good practice is considered and exchanged. In this regard, the process serves as an important capacity building instrument for participating institutions and individuals. Finally, as Pagani has indicated, 'an important function of peer review is to monitor and enhance compliance' by academic providers with internationally and nationally agreed upon 'policies, standards and principles' (Pagani, 2002, 12). Unlike journal publications, where blind reviewing introduces a greater measure of objectivity, programme reviews are not blindly *refereed*. The pitfalls of peer review have been extensively examined. Criticisms range from a 'philosophically faulty concept, which is proving disastrous for science' (Horrobin 1982, 217–218); inability to prevent scientific fraud or detect errors; to 'an entirely useless, if not positively harmful activity, based upon quite erroneous assumptions' (Ziman 1982, 245–246).

Nevertheless, although peer review does not always work as it should, it has become a widely established practice to secure the integrity of scientific and scholarly work. As Weller (2002, 342) put it, 'Despite its limitations, we need it. It is all we have, and it is hard to imagine how we can get along without it'. As Smith (1997, 760) put it, it is time 'to open up the black box of peer review'. What is required is a systemic scrutiny of peer review and its underlying assumptions in the context of institutional transformation, beyond just sorting out the good from the bad and pointing out the strengths and weaknesses. This article is an attempt in this direction.

The CHE Review and Accreditation Processes

The CHE programme review and re-accreditation process entails the following main steps: (i) development of evaluation criteria and respective minimum standards; (ii) constitution and training of the teams for both self-evaluation and external review; (iii) programme reviews; (iv) standardisation of the reports; (v) submission of the HEQC reports to concerned institutions; (vi) institutional responses to the HEQC Board; and (vii) final decision on re-accreditation by the HEQC Board (HEQC/CHE, 2004, 1).

The CHE's first task was to convene teams of academic staff with high academic standing, deemed to be knowledgeable in the field of educational leadership and management studies, with track records in programme review and accepted professional integrity, to develop the principles, criteria and standards against which teacher education programmes could be assessed,

including guidelines on how these should be implemented. It also prepared a manual for the training of the review teams.

Effective review required careful selection and training of the reviewers in the workshops arranged by the HEQC. Race, gender and institutional representivity or stakeholder representation were considered in the constitution of the review teams along with knowledge and professional concerns. Training was to promote rigour and ensure that the final outcome of the review stood firmly on correctly interpreted evidence, conceptual and terminological clarity and coherent inferences from the evidence in relation to the criteria throughout the process. The trainees were made aware of the guidelines governing the processes of self-evaluation, the preparation of the submission and the review and accreditation process as a whole. The most significant aspects in this regard included: (i) clarity about the objectives and principles of the HEQC's programme accreditation model; (ii) criteria and minimum standards for re-accreditation; (iii) categories of judgement to be made; and (iv) the main stages in the review and accreditation process (HEQC/CHE, 2005a). The training also dealt with the interpretation of the criteria, the conduct of self-evaluation (comprehensive and participatory) and presentation of the self-evaluation, including an indication of the documents to be displayed during site visits. It tackled most of the 'dos' and 'don'ts', and warned about the danger of being overcritical, arbitrary, self-serving, irresponsible, arrogant, inappropriate, biased, sloppy, subjective or secretive.

The Review Process: Key Steps

Generally, the reviewers are expected to evaluate the programme according to the following criteria: (i) synchronization with national, institutional and unit context; (ii) programme design and coordination; (iii) student recruitment, selection and admission; (iv) staffing; (v) teaching and learning; (vi) research; (vii) supervision of research dissertation; (viii) student assessment; (ix) infrastructure and library resources; (x) student retention, throughput rates and programme impact; and (xi) programme reviews (HEQC/CHE, 2005c, 22–39). For this purpose, they are required to judge how the programmes have complied with the minimum standards. They then classify the results in each instance in the following categories of judgement:

- *Commend*: All the minimum standards specified in the criterion are fully met and, in addition, good practices and innovation are identified in relation to the criterion.
- *Meets minimum standards*: Minimum standards as specified in the criterion were met.



- *Needs improvement*: Does not comply with all the minimum standards specified in the criterion. Problems/weaknesses could be addressed in a short period of time. In this case, an action plan, including timelines and checkpoints for improvement is required.
- *Does not comply*: Does not comply with the majority of the minimum standards specified in the criterion (HEQC/CHE, 2005c, 10).

This classification constitutes the basis on which the HEQC makes decisions for the accreditation outcomes of the programme as a whole. The institutions conducting the programmes should expect any of the following outcomes: (i) *fully accredited*, when the programme exceeds minimum standards specified in the criteria (and when it displays examples of good practice and innovation); (ii) *accredited with conditions*, when the programme complies with minimum standards but requires improvements; and (iii) *not accredited*, when the programme does not meet minimum standards (HEQC/CHE, 2005b).

Outcomes and Challenges

Out of 17 MED (ELM) programmes reviewed, 14 received full accreditation and one accreditation with conditions. Four had their accreditation withdrawn whereas another four decided to discontinue their programmes. Critical areas where programmes failed to meet the required standards and criteria include the question of design and relevance or more specifically compliance with national context, whereas most programmes received the largest number of 'commend' and 'meet minimum standards' ratings on infrastructure and library resources. Another important outcome of the review process was *individual and organisational learning*. During the review process peers exchanged information, attitudes and viewpoints about different approaches to educational leadership and management studies, and their applicability within their own institutional frameworks. For the reviewed, in particular, it offered the chance to present and clarify institutional rules, practices and procedures and the rationale underpinning them. For example, feedback from participants suggested a gradual realisation of the importance and need for regular programme evaluation, particularly in those settings, where it has not been regular practice. Generally, participants felt that, more than before, they were determined to get things right in so far as quality assurance was concerned. Building self-confidence and helping academics to be self-reflexive were some of the effects: 'The exercise gave us an opportunity to reflect on our own work in respect to programme design and coherence and have made us more determined to pay attention to detail' (Workshop feedback, 2005). It was also mentioned that the experience helped considerably in translating intuitive practices into conscious and rational procedures.

The CHE report highlighted as the main finding of the reviews the tension between theory and practice or the fact that institutions struggle to balance the needs of their students in terms of theoretical and practical knowledge. Other issues emerging from the review process include the challenges posed by the CHE idealism as expressed in stakeholder representation *vis-à-vis* knowledge and professional concerns — an important focal area of contestation.

The Limits of the HEQC Idealism

Two important ideas surfaced out of the experience of selection and training of reviewers. The first was the under-representation of women and black academics, and the limited experience in quality assurance allowed by the apartheid regime to these social categories. The second is related to the fact that academics from more established institutions are often not sensitive to the problems facing academics in historically disadvantaged institutions. The HEQC tried to address these problems by adopting the stakeholder model in the constitution of review teams to reconcile representivity with the commitment to maintaining high academic standards. The expectation was that through dialogue, reviewers would supersede their political differences, transcend endemic disagreements and build consensus that would inform decisions about aspects of the programmes that best hold against criticism, within the norms, criteria and standards agreed upon with the HEQC.

However, given their academic diversity, reviewers did not speak within a single discourse. They spoke within the ongoing conflict-ridden debate through conversations underpinned by contradictory or diverging paradigms. Their decisions and academic practices as quality controllers were informed by values, interests, theories and paradigms, which could neither be explicitly spelt out, made accessible, nor commonly understood across the review teams. As a result, reviews varied from panel to panel depending on the composition and the academic traditions of individual members. Only the presence of representatives of the HEQC and the appointment of strong panel chairs could minimise or contain intra-group or inter-group conflict.

What was underestimated in the CHE idealism is the notion that, given the diversity of the teams, knowledge and power interface in subtle ways in the micropolitics of peer review. Representatives of the HEQC and strong chairs in the panels were to mediate this process productively. Their *voices* as individuals *in* authority, by virtue of their association with the accreditation body (representatives of the HEQC), or as authorities by virtue of the power of knowledge they possessed, were critical in influencing the decision-making processes. Similarly, their *silence* as an important dimension of micropolitics, particularly when it assumed the form of exercise of power by withdrawal or



absence of action, had also considerable impact. Certain decisions prevailed in some instances only because those in authority or perceived as authorities in the field chose not to pronounce themselves. The worst scenario was when silence occurred because legitimate discourses and voices were suppressed through unifying and totalizing narratives of dominant expert forces like, for example, when a chair of a review team made the following comment: 'I do not think that institutions such as UCT or Wits would allow such mediocrity'.

Against this background, the assumption that the historical rivalry and competition, that is, the role of negative micropolitics, could be simply discarded and proved false. The racially structured legacies that constrained inter-institutional collaboration in the past manifested themselves through suspicion and ideologically loaded orientation at the expense of academic rigour: 'This is certainly an opportunity to challenge the racist and exclusionary policies at Y University'; 'Certainly a chance to make X University aware of their elitism'; 'What about the chaos in this HDI'; 'I think the HEQC will show that the privilege in historically white universities does equal to quality' and so on. Whether stated as gossip, rumour or joke, this coffee shop commentary was symptomatic of the legacies inherited by South African academics. Chubin and Hackett (1990, 122) refer to them as 'the partisan flavour reviewer comments', which seemingly violate principles of impartiality. Complaints about new criteria or new interpretations of the existing evaluation criteria being imposed were also heard. The point of contention was whether the minimum standards and correspondent criteria should be applied the same way in both historically advantaged and historically disadvantaged institutions, without sensitivity to historical legacies.

Different Profiles, Discourses and Epistemologies: (Re)Conceptualising the Field of Education Leadership and Management

The profiles of reviewers varied considerably. There were those who positioned themselves as 'guardians of disciplinary tradition' and emphasised the importance of disciplinary knowledge for solid preparation of education managers or leaders. For them, without core disciplinary knowledge, sound academic and pedagogical goals cannot be achieved: 'professional programmes also require strong research and disciplinary foundations'. There were 'non-tradition-oriented reviewers', who instead emphasised professional or skills-oriented packages directed at problem-solving challenges faced by education leaders. They considered knowledge and skills as being increasingly produced and disseminated in the context of application, that is, in the course of providing solutions to problems. There were also those who called for emphasis on flexibility and sensibility to institutional and programmatic diversity. Across

these categories, some placed emphasis on *transformation* or, in particular, responsiveness to societal needs and social justice. These profiles cannot be separated from the different ways individual reviewers understood, interpreted and reproduced their disciplines, constituted their discourses and shaped their social and intellectual practices.

Thus, conflicting epistemologies underpinning perspectives on educational leadership and management, and competing approaches to quality assessment, played themselves out, not always positively or productively. On the one hand, reviewers who were interviewed saw very little alignment between existing programmes and what they perceived as the ‘universal norm’ compliant with ‘international standards’: ‘We are lagging far behind compared to the world out there’; ‘... it is time we learn to live on planet earth rather than living in isolation’; and so forth. On the other hand, some called for an epistemological break from universalising paradigms or for the uncovering of silenced forms of knowledge in the field (e.g. African leadership). Words of caution were sounded: (i) against emerging anti-intellectual extremes (e.g. the assumption that knowledge produced in the Western world is necessarily meaningless and locally produced knowledge is meaningful); and (ii) against the danger of falling into a wishful thinking trap (e.g. only alternative epistemologies and paradigms, whether Western or Africanist, can do the trick in quality improvement). This diversity was reflected in the conversations within review teams and between review teams and the institutions with programmes under review, sometimes with negative consequences for decision making. Overall the pursuit of ‘academic excellence’ and ‘international standards’ remained a point of convergence. This jargon has been unproblematically accepted, irrespective of its obvious ambiguities. As Weber (1996, 2) has correctly pointed out ‘the idea of “excellence” and the “idea of international standards” are ... presumed to be eternal and valid for all time, irrespective of the specific socio-economic context which in fact defines their meaning’. Nzimande (1992) seems to suggest a departure from this view: ‘We are striving for excellence but within our own parameters or those parameters which take seriously our own context and epistemologies grounded on our experience and as such internationally acceptable’.

Competing interpretive frameworks and purposeful underestimation of the value of evidence

A major point of contention was the question of data interpretation by the reviewers. Successful outcome of the review stands firmly on correctly interpreted evidence, conceptual and terminological clarity and coherent inferences from the evidence in relation to the criteria and standards. The training of the reviewers emphasised the fact that the HEQC’s quality assurance principles,



fitness of purpose, *fitness for purpose* and *transformation*, should guide the thinking of the reviewers in making their judgments. On the *fitness of purpose*, they had to consider whether the training offered by the programmes was appropriate for the specific contextual conditions of teacher education in SA. On the *fitness for purpose*, the question was whether the programmes were providing ‘training that is presented at the appropriate level and with the requisite degree of support, resourcing and organization’ (CHE, 2010, 3). The reviewers had also to establish whether programmes that are ‘fit’ for the South African context were also addressing the challenges of *transformation* against the country’s apartheid legacy. Differences emerged on whether, the reading of evidence indicated that the programmes under review were conceptualised, designed and implemented with these goals in mind, particularly given the considerable differences academics in SA hold about what counts as genuine transformation. This turned into a tricky issue in the post-review negotiations between the HEQC and concerned institutions, and led to unscheduled institutional visits. A comment from an academic staff in response to a HEQC report is revealing in this regard:

Whereas the review portfolio attempted to be (as far as possible) empirical and descriptive, much of the HEQC evaluation report is impressionistic (‘there seems to be’, ‘there does not seem to be’, ‘it appears that’, ‘there are instances of’, ‘subjectivity may exist’) and anecdotal (‘in the opinion of most lecturers’, ‘the views suggest that’, ‘the panel was told’ — by whom, a representative majority?). In some cases, it appears that extempore comments by individuals have sidelined the extensive analysis of the portfolio itself. (Wits School of Education, 2006)

Difficulties in the reading of evidence were later acknowledged by the HEQC: ‘While it was clear that the empirical findings were important in their own right, and are the central source of reference in describing the state of the field, less clear was how the data from the reviews should be interpreted’ (CHE, 2010, 3).

Narrow interpretation of criteria and minimum standards: The paper and pencil approach

During training, the HEQC warned reviewers against dogmatic interpretation of minimum standards and assessment criteria. It emphasised that the minimum standards should not be used in a narrow checklist manner; there should be a ‘holistic treatment, interpretation and flexible application of the criteria’ ... so that the ‘minimum standards provide the foundations for the development and support of excellence at all levels of higher education and training’. However, in practice, obsession with minimum standards and the

search for best practices often tainted reviews with bureaucratic uncertainties. The CHE would later bring clarity to these issues: ‘the criteria needed to be applied with sensitivity to and understanding of local context’ (CHE, 2010, 4).

Professional vs academic emphasis

An unresolved issue was whether the programmes on education leadership and management should have a strictly professional orientation with emphasis on ‘skills development’ — a dominant tradition in historically Afrikaans institutions — or should be contextually and theoretically grounded — a tradition of former English speaking institutions. The former was a dominant model that deliberately presented itself as operating in the domain of applied competency that foregrounded skills and workplace concerns. The latter emphasised the presence of strong internal debate and research: ‘our priority [is] to nurture a culture of enquiry and openness, firstly between ourselves, about our own work and its effects, and then as a result in our deliberations with students who pass through our department’ (CHE, 2010, 25). Some institutions linked the culture of social enquiry to issues of transformation: ‘a key aspect of research support and development is ensuring the identification, support and retention of future generations of researchers, and drawing on the full range of intellectual talent available through achieving a more representative demographic profile’ (CHE, 2010, 25). A version of the last two tried to bridge the programme components that deal with leadership and management with disciplinary components that provide the necessary social theory underpinning practice in the field (theories of state and the policy process; society and schooling; education and development, etc.). As already indicated, there were instances where this was less coherently articulated through discipline specific modules such as comparative education, philosophy of education, history or sociology of education.

According to the CHE, beyond these variations, two orientations dominated institutional practices, one that emphasised the theoretical and one that emphasised the professional or the practical. The question was about how to strike a balance between theory and practice, as all programmes contained elements of the practical and the theoretical, an object of heated contestation throughout the work of the review panels. The CHE (2010, 4) report seems to have at last brought some clarity in this regard by pointing to the need to balance theory and practice with an environment of social enquiry: ‘... this means demonstrating a thorough grasp of how to integrate theory and practice: being able to inform one’s practice with theory, and understanding how practice might change theory. Reflection about practice is therefore the central characteristic of a good ELM and widely agreed to be a key generic feature of this programme’. According to the CHE, in the category of the



programmes that were considered to have met minimum standards, most tended to lean towards the theoretical with a strong research basis.

Stakeholder vs expert (academic or professional) concerns

In line with the HEQC strategy, emphasis was placed on stakeholder involvement in aspects concerning conceptualisation, design and the governance of the programmes, very often with a narrow approach to professional development, symptomatic of lack of research in the field. For example, some reviewers felt that unless students have a role in setting the parameters in the selection of relevant knowledge, more specifically in deciding what sort of knowledge should be considered, very limited improvement could be achieved. The significance given to student voices was in some cases extended to the employers and the markets in general. Opponents of this perspective complained about too much emphasis on compliance with both institutional and national policies or stakeholder demands at the expense of sound academic concerns. Too much meddling of university managers/administrators in curriculum issues was perceived as an entrenchment of managerialism or audit culture in a knowledge field.

Tradition/standardisation vs innovation

The field of education leadership and management in SA is perhaps one of the few where tradition has been solidly entrenched with considerable standardisation of practice and there is considerable resistance to innovation. Unlike other fields of social science, the programmes are here characterised by almost overwhelming similarity in the design and structure. Most reviewers tended to endorse a programme when they found this pattern. In opposition, 'non-traditionalists' were also tempted to endorse a programme just simply because it looked innovative. An important point of contestation separated, for example, Eurocentrists (e.g. those advocating industry-based models of leadership and management and managerialism) and Afrocentrists (e.g. those advocating leadership practices rooted in the African tradition, and more specifically the philosophy of Ubuntu). Perhaps, the major weakness of the traditional approach is its universalising academic discourse that does not leave room to innovation.

In all, the reviewers responded differently in their conversations: (i) by either thoughtlessly dismissing non-traditional forms as 'incoherent nonsense', or by treating them with indifferent tolerance; (ii) by rejecting a programme component simply, because it did not conform to the standard assumptions and standard operating procedures employed in the past; and (iii) by just playing a paradigm matching game treating work within a particular paradigm



with fairness. As a result, the judgements of the reviewers were very often conflicting and their advice frequently contradictory. Long discussions were held to reconcile the differences and very often the decision that prevailed reflected the strongest (more articulate) *voice* and not necessarily the correct voice. In such circumstances, silence tends to be erroneously perceived as consensus. Unfortunately, the panellists were not clearly warned during the training against these discursive incidents. The CHE (2010, 4) stresses in its report that one could not expect an ELM programme developed in one institution to be replicated with equal success in another, where the circumstances were different. In its view, ‘the *localisation* of the programme must be acknowledged when assessing its quality in the South African context’ (CHE, 2010, 4). Indeed, institutions tend to stick to what works for them and reflects their academic identity. Not always the so-called universal models suit their specific circumstances.

Conclusion

The significance of the national reviews lies both in the process and the outcome. While the ultimate goal is the re-accreditation of the programmes, its importance can also be judged from its benefits as an individual and organisational learning process: the opportunities for faculty to learn from each other, to practice new techniques and approaches in programme design and delivery, to get direct feedback on their academic performance and to receive coaching from colleagues. In other words, its main thrust was both developmental and judgmental.

Overall, the road ahead remains unexplored. It will certainly require considerable research and reflection to abate or minimise the weaknesses of peer review in programme evaluation. There are no ready-made models to address the challenges. The experience raises a number of critical questions. First, how should quality control bodies, including the CHE, respond to the growing contestation of peer review in quality control? Peer review is a well-established concept widely practiced within the scientific community. It is unlikely to be abandoned. It must be opened up and subjected to careful scrutiny as an important site of intellectual engagement. It must also be placed on the agenda of the ongoing conversations between the HEQC and programme providers.

Second, how do we reconcile the tension between stakeholder and professional concerns? On the positive side, the race, gender and institutional mix of reviewers stimulated learning across institutions and curtailed incestuous institutional practices where small group of reviewers review each other’s work, especially in narrowly defined specialty areas. On the downside, it required



a tighter standardisation of the reports due to the low level of consensus among reviewers, inconsistencies of judgment, errors of omission (when flawed or fraudulent programme are allowed to slip through) and errors of commission (when a competitor's programme was blocked or delayed, or its results or arguments just appropriated). Inaccuracies (conceptual and factual) became inevitable. Reports were produced that defeated minimum professional standards in report writing. Most importantly, by privileging *political concerns*, the stakeholder model very often collided with the commitment to high standards — *professional concerns* — giving room to 'rubber stamps' or incompetent reviewers who did little to balance teamwork. Briefly, although representation remains a necessity for credibility and legitimacy reasons posed by the apartheid legacy, more attention should be paid to the capability, experience and expertise of reviewers, particularly at the evaluation or review stage where primacy should be given to peer review. Stakeholders could dominate the accreditation stage with no harm to professional integrity of the programmes. However, any decision in this regard will necessitate adequate problematisation of both peer review and the stakeholder model.

Third, how do we resolve productively the epistemological battles that dominate the reviews? The HEQC remained passive on this matter, a position that is justifiable in present time — late modernity (Beck 1992, 1999), a globalising world, a world characterised by risk and uncertainty, where we face increasing demands for recognition of diverse epistemological and knowledge forms. By doing so, it opened room for what Biesta (2006) refers to as an open-ended epistemology that is social constructivist and realist, and enhances reflexivity, agency and responsiveness to contextual realities. It gave space for a form of realism that recognises that systematically organised bodies of knowledge exist outside individual constructions of it, that knowledge is fallible and open to change, and that new contextually significant meaning making possibilities may emerge. It is faulted, however, for not providing the context under which choices in this regard could be negotiated, which only later were articulated as key findings of the reviews: (i) the balance between theory and practice; (ii) an environment that fosters critical debate and research; and (iii) the packaging of knowledge, skills and modes of delivery that ensure graduate readiness.

Forth, what do we make of the current programmes that have achieved accreditation? Whatever answer is given to this question, the battle is not over. Traditional assumptions and constructs of what constitutes a good programme have become an object of contestation. In this regard, the paper agrees with Greenstein (1995, 12) that 'Avoiding the pitfalls of uncritical borrowing on the one hand and insularity on the other, we should continue to look for creative ways of meshing the specificity of the South African condition with the quest for universally acknowledged educational achievements'.

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