Umalusi's Site Visits to Independent Schools in 2006

Summary

UMALUSI

Council for Quality Assurance in General and Further Education and Training

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UMALUSI COUNCIL FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN GENERAL AND FURTHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING

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Summary

Intentions and significance

In the course of 2006 Umalusi's Evaluation and Accreditation Unit undertook a programme of site visits involving 100 independent schools. The programme constituted a vital step in the development of Umalusi's roles in the accreditation of independent schools and the improvement of schooling more generally. The programme has advanced the actual process of accrediting schools and has thrown some light on the situation of a variety of independent schools. This includes schools that have not applied for accreditation, those with low pass rates in the 2005 Senior Certificate examinations, and some schools of questionable provenance. The programme has also contributed to Umalusi's capacity to utilise accreditation and quality assurance in a developmental spirit, not least by deepening Umalusi's understanding of the task and the field.

The site visit programme was not designed as research. Rather, it was intended to further establish Umalusi's presence in the sector and the band, verify information provided in self-evaluation reports by provisionally accredited providers, initiate interventions with poorly performing schools in terms of their matric results and bring more schools into the quality loop.

The programme is expected to impact positively on the extension of the practice of site visits and verification to other independent schools and ultimately on the quality assurance of public schools as well.

Background perspectives

Accreditation and quality assurance

The present report is informed by a literature study and a Department for International Development (DFID) 2005 report. The literature study reflects on the newness of accreditation in South African schooling. The pioneering character of the endeavour is seen to be emphasised by the linkage of accreditation to the idea of quality assurance, which is relatively unexplored internationally in the context of schooling. This literature study also shows that Umalusi's development of its approaches to quality assurance, notably the comprehensiveness of its approach, is in line with international thinking on the subject.

Independent schools in South Africa

The second recent DFID report on non-government schooling provides a range of useful insights: independent schooling in Sub-Saharan Africa has grown rapidly since the 1990s. Growth in South Africa is significant, but not nearly as rapid as in a number of other countries. The authors estimate that there are between 1 200 and 2 000 independent schools in South Africa. The high proportion of small schools with low fees, often privately owned and catering for poor communities, is striking. The South African constitutional and regulatory environment of independent schooling is described positively in the DFID study, but limited capacity to administer the regulations in some provinces is noted.

The programme of site visits

One hundred schools were identified in a nationally constructed sample intended to enable Umalusi to contrast schools in terms of their achievement in the Senior Certificate and their accreditation status. Since an important concern was to focus on schools that might need special

attention, the sampling avoided including large numbers of high achieving schools, especially those registered with the IEB. (The Northern Cape was excluded from the sample; it had few independent schools and none that were low achievers in the 2005 Senior Certificate.)

Teams of evaluators, consisting of well-qualified peers (such as principals of independent schools) were trained, and provided with site-visit booklets. At least one, but often two, members of the teams conducted intensive, highly structured one-day visits. Visits included structured interviews with management, focus groups of randomly selected teachers and Grade 12 learners, and an inspection of the premises. In the case of provisionally accredited schools, the schools' self-evaluations and/or progress reports were subjected to a comprehensive verification. The evidence was recorded in the site visit booklets and was later quantified by selected evaluators who acted as monitors of the process. Every school in the sample received a feed-back report indicating the way forward in terms of required improvements, and future accreditation and monitoring requirements.

In the event, the programme yielded 87 usable records. (A range of contingencies prevented the participation or analysis of the other 13 targeted schools.) These records, together with extensive data provided by the schools, were analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively. A preliminary report on the data analysis then provided the basis for a plenary workshop of evaluators and other participants in the process. Feedback from the workshop informed further interpretation of the data.

The sampling does not allow the generalization of the observations from the site visits to be considered as representative

of independent schools' sector in South Africa. In addition, although presented in some cases in terms of provinces, the sample was drawn nationally and does not allow for meaningful comparisons between the provinces. Nonetheless, it seemed important to capture the experience as fully as possible. The report itself therefore includes 28 tables and a full analysis of these in the light of the qualitative feedback

Lessons from the site visits

The key lessons emerging from this report may be summarised as follow:

Umalusi's accreditation and monitoring processes

1 Umalusi's approach to the development and implementation of its accreditation practices has been collaborative, participative and developmental. The site visit programme has confirmed the wisdom of this approach.

2 Umalusi's process of provisional accreditation is well received and participating schools have for the most part acted on and benefited from the provisions for continuous improvement required by the process.

3 Nevertheless, it is clear that in spite of extensive efforts to communicate with the independent school sector, many institutions are either unaware of the accreditation process or of all its requirements. A more effective and far reaching communication strategy must therefore be devised and implemented.

4 While a small number of the schools in the sample could indeed be considered national assets and exemplars of inspiring education provision, most of the schools in the sample were found to be effective: these generally do not need any intervention and Umalusi's annual monitoring should suffice.

5 However, due to differing levels of capacity and the sheer diversity of schools Umalusi must continue with the development of benchmarks for good practice and adequate monitoring capacity in the sector through the continued use of peers as evaluators and the sharing of good practices.

6 To this end building in a number of "good practice workshops" would profit the independent school sector. A clear first theme emerging from the site visits would be "Ideas for Designing and Running an Effective QMS". This could involve the presentation of exemplars from schools of different types. It would probably be necessary to run such a workshop on a regional basis.

Streamlining and articulation

1 Observations emerging from the site visits and the literature make it clear that newly instituted accreditation and quality assurance can be most fruitful. They will be of greatest value in promoting continuous improvement in education if all role players, including the Minister's office, national and provincial departments of education, and the individual schools and their communities, are positively involved.

2 The programme of site visits was generally perceived in a positive light by participating schools and many compliments have been received about the way it was conceived and managed; the experience gained has developed capacity, and points to various possible refinements in future procedures. Although the reporting and verification system is well-conceived and thorough, it may need to be focused and streamlined as accreditation goes to scale.

3 In terms of the registration and subsidising of independent schools by provincial departments of education, improved capacity might be developed in some provincial departments of education for registering and monitoring independent schools and managing subsidies. There would appear to be cases where registration requirements and norms are not consistently applied. Some officials feel that uniform national regulations for subsidies should be agreed on and applied in the place of the present inconsistencies from province to province. Enhanced, preferably standardised, data management would also be desirable.

4 Umalusi, the DoE and the PDEs should also work towards stronger articulation between accreditation and registration processes. This may include:

- PDEs and Umalusi agreeing on tighter coordination and mutual reporting processes in respect of registration/accreditation processes.
- It is also important to look into the possibilities of harmonising the data collection from independent schools for accreditation and registration purposes. This would be most useful to the authorities involved while lessening the reporting and accountability load on the schools.

5 Strategic workshops might also be held with the DoE and PDEs and other relevant stakeholders on questions about the relationship of accreditation and registration, the harmonisation of data collection and the management of subsidies. A workshop for the provincial departments of education might also be devoted to the relevance of the site visit programme for the quality assurance of public schools

Diversity and nature of schools

1 A question whose answer remains opaque in spite of the evidence provided by the site visits is why many of the schools came into existence and why they prove sustainable when equivalent state schooling should be available. The question seems pressing in relation

to the weakest schools, but could also be applied to the middling schools that do not offer some unique contextually justified service. Research could be very useful in understanding the existence of such schools and in guiding policy and practices in relation to them.

2 The focus group feedback pointed to the existence of a fair number of unregistered, "hidden", schools of dubious provenance; this requires a specific investigation that was beyond the scope of the present project.

3. Most of the weaker independent schools do not appear to constitute a problem of great scale or urgency, and may at most need discerning intervention or further investigation on an individual basis. Exploitation for financial gain does not seem to be a serious factor in the sample of schools visited, especially given their fees. (Staff salaries, though, can be so low as to appear questionable.) However, a few schools in the sample could be regarded as problematic. Inappropriate private ownership – in some cases with no professional knowledge or interest in education and unconstrained by anything more than token governance structures – seems open to censure.

4 The evidence does not allow for firm conclusions about the nationality of teachers and learners, but it would seem that some schools cater especially for expatriates from elsewhere in Africa and employ expatriate teachers, who may be open to exploitation.

5 The sheer diversity of schools suggests the possible need for diverse strategies for accreditation while maintaining common standards. Research is needed to deepen, clarify and refine the approaches to accreditation.

Indicators of quality

1 The question of indicators remains problematic and poorly understood in practice. A process of refining indicators plus a longitudinal study of their value might prove useful. Identify and selecting the most appropriate information required from schools as ongoing indicators of quality provision to make reporting, handling and interpretation less onerous and to avoid duplication is much needed.

2 One of the most interesting detailed observations was the strong positive relationship, in this constructed sample at least, of educator qualifications to learner performance in the Senior Certificate. However this observation might need further exploration.

3 The result of this project seems to indicate that, for all its shortcomings, the pass rate in the Senior Certificate is a good rough guide to quality. The rate of endorsements for access to higher education is an even stronger discriminator. However, this must always be seen against the particular school's context and intentions.

The accreditation process should provide a useful barometer to conditions in the independent schooling sector. Quality assurance is among other things an early warning system, so it is important that a cost-effective, relatively frequent reporting system be developed that rapidly provides a reading of key indicators, both to the higher authorities and the sector itself. The present report is substantial because it comes near the start of the process. Subsequent reports are likely to be briefer, but still telling.

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