How can quality assurance improve quality?

Is the quality
of public schooling enhanced by
efforts to evaluate it?

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Introduction

Countries put considerable effort into quality assuring their education systems. Quality assurance systems vary, the differing systems having different foci, processes, and results. The focus in this seminar is on the role of quality assurance in setting and maintaining educational standards and assuring the quality of curricula and qualifications, educational provision, and assessment, in South Africa.

In this seminar—the last in a series of six public lecture- and discussion sessions on making a difference in public schooling—key role-players in the field presented their ideas on how quality assurance can improve quality. First to present was Ms Eugenie Rabe, Chief Operating Officer of Umalusi, Council for Quality Assurance in General and Further Education and Training—the institution responsible for quality assurance of education up to the end of Further Education. Second to speak was Ms Anne Oberholzer, Chief Executive Officer of the Independent Examinations Board (IEB)—an independent assessment body responsible for independent matriculation examinations and adult basic education and training. Dr Ben Parker, Director of Research at the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA)—the custodian of the National Qualifications Framework—then presented. Read about the views of these key figures in this booklet.

Welcome and introduction of the first speaker

Mr. John Pampallis, Director of the Centre for Education Policy Development (CEPD) welcomed the audience to the seminar and explained that it was the last in a series of public lecture sessions around the theme *Making a difference in public schooling.* He pointed to the focus of this seminar entitled *How can quality assurance improve quality?* noting that its sub-theme of *Is quality enhanced by efforts to evaluate it?* reminded him of an expression of the Chief Executive Officer of Umalusi, Dr Peliwe Lolwana, that *it is not possible to fatten a pig by weighing it.* He mentioned that since 1994, the issue of quality assurance has been an important focus in the South African education system. In fact, the first legislation passed by the post-1994 Minister of Education was that bringing the

South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) into being. Since then, various quality assurance bodies have been established—examples are the Council for Higher Education (CHE); the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC); and Umalusi. Other bodies such as the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO) are in the process of being constituted.

Mr. Pampallis then introduced the first speaker, Ms Eugenie Rabe. Ms Rabe has over 23 years of experience in schooling and vocational education. She came to Umalusi in 2001 when it was still a very young organization and has worked in various capacities at this institution, starting as Manager for Quality Promotion in Vocational Education and Training (VET). In 2004 she established the Evaluation and Accreditation Unit— the Umalusi unit responsible for monitoring the quality of educational provision. In 2007 she was promoted to her current position of Chief Operating Officer.

How can quality assurance improve quality? Is quality enhanced by efforts to evaluate it? An Umalusi perspective

Ms Eugenie Rabe, Chief Operations Officer of Umalusi, Council for Quality Assurance in General and Further Education and Training

Ms Rabe began by stating that before attempting to answer the question *How can quality assurance improve quality?* one needs to take a position with respect to quality assurance. In other words, one needs to delineate the way in which quality assurance will be defined. Umalusi has been working on its position in relation to quality assurance since the inception of the institution in 2001, and continues to develop its conceptions and approaches as the mandate and scope of work of the organization unfold. She indicated that she would begin by elaborating on the position taken by Umalusi, drawing on the work of Michael Young (see Young 2004) in the process.

Ms Rabe argued that there are certain assumptions underlying the notion of quality assurance. The first of these assumptions is that *there*

is something to quality assure and that the system under consideration is sufficiently developed to support this process. It must be remembered that with respect to the public system in South Africa, there are still huge inequalities between schools, and that many of these institutions are not established to a sufficiently substantial degree.

Second, there is an assumption that *all of the key aspects of quality can be measured*. Yet for Ms Rabe it is critically important to bear in mind the fact that some things are not easily measurable. Ms Rabe noted, as did Einstein before her, that not everything that counts can be counted and not everything that can be counted counts.

Ms Rabe emphasized that evaluations are *always* founded on assumptions of quality and purpose, and that measurement can only occur within the context of these definitions of quality, and purposes. This link of evaluation to context applies—whether or not the purposes further compliance or accountability, and regardless of the degree to which definitions of quality are implicit or explicit. Ms Rabe explained that her presentation would focus on links between quality assurance and its contexts, and on the associated definitions of quality.

Traditionally in the West, it was understood that quality was implicit. This view is encapsulated in the following quote: "…the quality of the university is similar to love: intangible, but existent; perceptible, but not quantifiable; ephemeral, so that one has to endeavour to it…" (Müller-Böling in Kappler *et al.*, 2000: 180). In recent years there have been ongoing efforts to make the dimensions of quality more explicit. As the quotation "…the first absolute of Quality Management is: quality has to be defined as conformance to requirements, not as goodness…" (Crosby 1984: 64) shows, clarity starkly juxtaposes and polarizes differing definitions of quality.

Ms Rabe then expanded on the traditional Western idea of quality, noting that in this view quality is regarded as a given and as not being contingent on the quality assurance profession (see Young 2004)[1]. Quality is based on, and bound to, the reputation of the institution with which it

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[1] The ideas in this paragraph, and where mentioned from this paragraph onwards, are derived from a research paper developed for Umalusi by Dr Michael Young (2004), entitled Approaches to quality assurance in the GET and FET bands.

is associated. Further, it carries the respect and trust historically linked to that institution. In addition, the institutions traditionally associated with quality tend to be exclusive and selective; they conduct entrance exams and have various other 'hoops to jump' for individuals wishing to enter. Finally, such institutions generally operate with a professionally agreed-upon and centralized curriculum. Associated programmes of assessment tend to be norm-referenced; assessment-related judgments are based on expert knowledge or involve specialized judgment.

In contrast, newer understandings of quality are 'neo-liberal' and have developed in response to particular policy environments. These conceptions admit greater freedom for institutions to set standards than do traditional approaches, but they also include more regulation than was previously the case. In short, the power to quality-control is devolved to institutions, but while they have the right to develop curricula and to conduct assessments, there are many rules governing the space in which they conduct these activities.

The neo-liberal model of quality is linked to industrial systems theory (Scheerens 2004)—a theory in which quality is based on a formula which can be summarized as 'input + process = output'. Quality is expressed in terms of outcomes and measurement criteria. There is an emphasis on compliance with specific criteria. Further, in order to achieve required standards, prescribed evidence must be presented. The curriculum is de-centralized. Assessment is criterion-based. Ms Rabe claimed that this system is generally seen as being more transparent and fair than that linked to the traditional approach—the explicitness of evaluation criteria certainly makes the dimensions of quality more visible. This visibility is democratic—the criteria are there for *all* rather than a select few to see. Further, by being visible, criteria are opened to criticism, contest and appeal—they are de-linked from particular institutions. This state of affairs is viewed as a positive one as it permits a greater degree of access than was previously the case. In addition, it is not linked and limited to any specific context.

Ms Rabe then expanded on the shift that has taken place between on one hand, the earlier view of quality as being implicit and associated with trust and specialist knowledge, and on the other, the newer concept of

quality linked to explicit criteria and evidence. Expertise has shifted from an emphasis on content and tradition, to a focus on processes and procedures. The idea that there is a non-measurable intrinsic aspect to quality has been lost. However, although the extent of the subjectivity of judgments made in relation to assessment may lessen, the dangers of over-specification and 'box ticking' increase with the increase in explicitness of criteria.

Ms Rabe moved on to question if quality is lost or gained in this shift from traditional to neo-liberal approaches to quality assurance. From an Umalusi perspective, the tension between judgements made according to specialist knowledge or disciplines on one hand, and judgements based on technical procedures on the other, will always remain. There are aspects of quality in each of these approaches, and Umalusi needs to *manage* the tension. Ms Rabe put forward the Umalusi idea that both notions of quality and its measurement are matters of expert judgment and meeting specified outcomes—and that outcomes can assist expert judgment. Outcomes do not necessarily set standards—that is, because outcomes are decreed does necessarily imply standards. However, the fact that outcomes or standards are described in an explicit way may provide guidance for expert judgement. This raises issues around compliance: to what extent must people comply and who decides on this issue? Ms Rabe pointed out that compliance becomes very difficult to manage.

Ms Rabe said that within this background sketch, she would look briefly at four models of quality assurance used throughout the world (Young 2004)[2]. These models are seldom used exclusively; it is more common for them to be found in combination. The *examinations model* has a long tradition and is generally known and familiar. This model includes 'high stakes examinations' for university entrance—exams with an emphasis on maintaining national, and increasingly international, standards. Benchmarking the South African matriculation examinations against the British O-levels and A-levels is an example of this kind of system. It is a model used in education systems with large numbers of learners. It aims to ensure that the certificates awarded have a value that is independent

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[2] The four modes of quality assurance discussed in this paper are drawn from the research paper developed for Umalusi by Dr Michael Young (2005), entitled Approaches to quality assurance in the GET and FET bands.

of particular institutions.

Ms Rabe made clear that she was not going to discuss problems associated with the examination system in any detail, other than to say that in practice only a limited number of learners succeed in the system, as many South African schools do not have the resources to prepare learners within such a model. The system has an academic bias and centralised curricula. It is relatively inflexible and not responsive to change. Ms Rabe noted that there are ways of making such systems more flexible, but that time constraints precluded discussion of these aspects in this seminar.

The examinations model depends entirely on learners being able to express their knowledge and thoughts precisely and coherently in relatively short periods of two to three hours. There is generally an uncritical acceptance of the merits of unseen written examination papers for testing of the abilities of students. However this particular model is held in great public trust, and in most countries has high status—it is seen as the best mechanism for the most accurate measuring of learner achievement. This trust depends largely on the quality of external marking.

A second quality assurance model is the *accreditation/validation model*. Ms Rabe explained that this model is used primarily in the vocational training sector where practical skills are of prime importance. However, it is also relevant in the schooling sector. In this model the curriculum is usually 'decentralized'—in other words, standards are externally (possibly nationally) set for particular qualifications and providers develop their individual (provider-specific) curricula around the agreed-upon standards. There is a tendency for standards to specify outcomes to be achieved and processes to be followed—it is up to individual institutions to provide explicit content-related details.

In the accreditation model providers conduct criterion-referenced assessment. Unlike in the examinations model, in this model there is a much wider use of different forms of assessment, and not just 'pen and paper' testing. Assessment or awarding bodies (to use the South African term and that used in the United Kingdom respectively) accredit centres or colleges, and monitor their internal assessment procedures on-site. Ongoing relationships and close ties often develop between providers and their validating bodies through this external verification process—

Ms Rabe indicated that these working relationships do not develop in the examinations model.

The accreditation/ validation model is a flexible one, and can easily respond to the specific circumstances of particular students and communities. It can also account for the knowledge needs of local industries; accommodate wide groups of differing stakeholders; and because of the close validating-body-institutional relationships, has potential to build institutional capacity. Weaknesses of this model include potential variation of standards. Further, standards tend to drop across the range of providers concerned, when external verification is not sufficiently thorough. This system can also cause assessment-related bureaucratic procedures and officials—such as registered assessors, monitors, moderators, and others—to multiply. Lastly, in this model there is a danger that educational content and its supporting processes become separated.

The *inspection model* is largely focused on schooling and is the most holistic of the three models, considering as it does, the activities of institutions 'on the whole'. It does not focus purely on external assessment as in the examinations model; neither does it emphasize site-based development of learning programmes as in the accreditation model. It reflects the whole organisation as a living entity, and is generally used for accountability purposes.

The *inspection model* can involve a once-off visit to the site concerned, or repeat visits—followed by the presentation of an inspection report to the national Department of Education or other level of authority in the education system. Inspections are increasingly conducted with the aim of supporting development and improvement in individual institutions. An inspection system can be developed independently of the accreditation/ validation or examination models, and each of these models can be used in complementary ways in the system: outcomes which are the products of examination and accreditation can become part of the data for inspection.

The fourth model is that of *systemic evaluation*. This is the model favoured by the Department of Education (DoE) in South Africa. As a model it is explicitly different to the other three models. It is complementary

to each, and is adopted *in addition* to the other models. Its goal is to obtain some measures of system, band, or sector performance, by means of sampling. This approach can mean visiting a sample of schools, going into individual classrooms, or looking at achievement results. The focus is on the *whole system* rather than on individual or institutional levels of measurement.

Ms Rabe then honed in on Umalusi. She explained that after having looked at international models for setting and maintaining standards, Umalusi came up with its own model which she called the *'potjie approach'*. In this model, a combination or *hybrid of approaches* is adopted—the 'stew' inside the potjie representing this mixture. A central concept around which the Umalusi method revolves is 'credible certification'.

In order to issue credible certificates, three important sets of processes need to be followed. These sets of processes are examinations, accreditation, and inspection. The processes need to ensure that the qualifications developed are of high quality—and the processes need to define what comprises that quality. They also need to define what counts as quality, and evaluate the curricula associated with those qualifications (curricula need to be fit-for-purpose). Umalusi also needs to quality assure all of the sub-processes and content associated with assessment. Umalusi proposes central (national) assessment wherever possible. Umalusi recommends a combination of organized external assessment (examinations) combined with internal or continuous assessment—the balance of each depending on the knowledge that is being tested. Umalusi also quality assures institutions (educational providers) and assessment bodies such as departments of education and the Independent Examinations Board (IEB). Umalusi mixes all of these approaches into the 'pot' of a mixed model. The overall approach and its sub-parts are informed by statistical information and research—this work being the 'fire' under the pot assuring that what Umalusi does has been well considered and thoroughly thought through.

Ms Rabe then posed the question as to what the sum of all of Umalusi's approaches means, in real (specific and practical) terms. She answered that it means credible certification. It means looking for a small number of broad qualification types, each with a few designated variants.

It also means working towards a central curriculum—a curriculum with both breadth and depth, and containing outcomes that specify content and assessment guidelines in an explicit way. This explication includes the clear structuring, in the curriculum, of what teachers need to teach and what learners need to learn. In addition, it means credible centralised external assessment—where credible examinations feature, and where these exams are not necessarily always 'pen and paper' tests. Practical examinations may be relevant, and have a place. Ms Rabe emphasized that the *whole system* is important if credible certificates are to be issued. This system includes reliable and trustworthy administration support sub-systems throughout the overarching larger quality assurance system.

In terms of the quality assurance of educational provision—quality assurance procedures apply to all providers of education and assessment bodies; to all training that is offered, and to assessment. Assessment bodies are central to Umalusi's quality assurance provision, and Ms Rabe noted that Umalusi may need to take on more quality assurance work in relation to these bodies than is currently the case.

In short, Umalusi measures quality in the context of qualifications and curriculum (intended and assessed curriculum) on offer. There is a focus on the quality of leadership and management as well as on the quality of teaching and learning resources. This approach differs from the industrial or vocational model in which there is a focus on 'input, process and output'. In many instances outside of the Umalusi context only the inputs and outputs—what is put into the system, and results achieved—are measured, and on the basis of these two things, judgments regarding the quality of provision are made.

Umalusi believes that it is important to quality assure educational 'processes', that these processes are key determining action points for achieving quality—and that they are often not measured when quality is determined. Some of these processes relate to credible and fair external and internal assessment practises, some of which are carried out at site (school and college) level. Monitoring the quality of these assessment processes involves setting up a system and examination bodies to both set exams and monitor continuous assessment. As discussed earlier, this model builds up very close relationships between the assessment bodies and

the schools, colleges or centres. Assessment bodies take responsibility not only for the quality assurance of assessment, but also for the quality of the teaching and learning: assessment starts to inform teaching and learning. Assessment bodies have an important role to play in the maintenance of academic standards.

In conclusion Ms Rabe reminded the audience to keep in mind the fundamental principle that quality assurance can inform quality only if there is *something to assure* in the first place. Importantly, it is generally known that inspection does not sit comfortably with individuals and institutions unless there is a shared notion between inspectors and the inspected, of the need for *co-operation for development and improvement*. Ms Rabe stressed that this development and improvement needs to be followed up with *continual support*: if this support does not materialize, there is a strong chance that improvement will not continue. In other words, the 'loop of the improvement cycle' needs to be closed with feedback—this feedback ensures continuation of the cycle. This concept applies particularly in the context of external assessment—especially since it often happens that after exams, information is not fed back into schools and classrooms. Ms Rabe ended by echoing an idea mentioned at the start of her presentation, namely that there are important things that cannot be measured. She urged teachers need to make space for these things in their classrooms.

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Introduction of the second speaker

Mr Pampallis introduced the second speaker, Ms Anne Oberholzer, Chief Executive Officer of the Independent Examinations Board (IEB). Originally from KwaZulu-Natal and a teacher at secondary school level in the state system for many years, she later joined the Research Unit of the Curriculum Evaluation Section in then Natal Education Department. Her research focused on issues relating to examinations and assessment in general. Now the Chief Executive Officer of the IEB, one of her key interests remains the impact of assessment and exit examinations. She is equally committed to the improvement of teaching and learning.
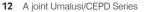
Why shouldn't quality be enhanced by efforts to evaluate it?

Ms Anne Oberholzer, Chief Executive Officer, Independent Examinations Board (IEB)

Ms Oberholzer began by commenting that she had attended the fifth international conference of the *Association of Examination and Accreditation Bodies* hosted by Umalusi earlier this year (2008). She added that one of the themes running through the conference had embraced the role of accreditation in quality assurance, and that attending these sessions had assisted her preparation for this seminar. She explained that she would tackle the question *How can quality assurance improve quality?* by turning it upside down. In this presentation she would thus explore the question *Why should evaluation not improve quality?* Ms Oberholzer also indicated that although she was going to focus on her own institution—the IEB—there might be overlaps in what she said, with content in the other two presentations.

Ms Oberholzer noted that when answering the question *Why shouldn't quality be enhanced through efforts to evaluate it?* the first situation in which quality would not be enhanced would be when a definition of quality adopted for quality assurance had little meaning. In other words, if the idea or definition of quality adopted had little meaning for those in the evaluation system—constituents or users of the institutions being

evaluated, and evaluators—quality assurance would come to nought. Put differently, role-players need to trust and buy into definitions of quality for quality assurance to have an impact. Ms Oberholzer pointed out that it is therefore crucial to look at definitions of quality. Evaluators and those being evaluated might not buy into all notions of quality in education, especially since these conceptions are founded to differing degrees, on political and educational imperatives respectively.

When approaching the issue of defining quality, Ms Oberholzer noted that a range of issues go into defining and determining it, and proceeded to introduce four possible approaches towards establishing definitions of quality. She termed the first *excellence standards*, or 'being the best'—a notion long associated with quality. The second approach involves the idea of *fitness for purpose*—here the concept of quality is broadened to cover a wide range of educational institutions. The idea of 'being the best' is replaced by the idea of suitability or 'fitness for purpose'. Institutions working in this paradigm define their aims and goals, and quality assurance processes check the extent to which these ideals have been met. Ms Oberholzer suggested that the biggest limiting factor in this paradigm from an educational point of view, is the interests of those specifying the aims and goals—interests could be linked to fields other than educational ones, and may potentially lead to goals that do not best serve educationally sound practices.

There will be differences in definitions of quality across institutions in the developed and developing worlds. Ms Oberholzer pointed to the influx of international institutions into developing contexts—here definitions of quality are linked to a paradigm of *basic standards*. In developing contexts there is a necessity for defining basic standards, but these are potentially in conflict with excellence.

A fourth conception of quality, especially for institutions entirely dependent on fees charged to users of the institutions, is *customer or consumer satisfaction*. In these cases it might be pertinent to question not only whether or not learners are receiving the instructional content desired, but also—are they being exposed to the moral values and particular learning environments that parents might want?

Ms Oberholzer argued that the four outlined approaches to defining quality create a whole range of tensions. Each paradigm suggests a distinct

choice and use of standards and indicators. If one is operating within the excellence model, the standards and indicators for measuring these standards will differ from those in a basic minimum standards model. Ms Oberholzer pointed out that emerging trends suggest a notion of quality that—depending on the institution—tries to integrate one or more of the models. There could thus conceivably be an emphasis on the achievement of minimum standards *together with* the setting of maximum achievable objectives in relation to the context and resources of institutions. Attempts to meet the expectations of stakeholders and to strive for excellence could feature *in addition* to these other goals.

Ms Oberholzer said that she found it interesting to observe that the dominance of one or other of the four models is cyclical. When the more modern comprehensive universities entered the picture, the focus on excellence traditionally associated with established universities such as Cambridge, Oxford, Harvard and others, shifted towards 'fit for purpose' goals. As globalisation came to the fore and international universities spread from developed to developing contexts the idea of 'minimum standards' became an issue. The growth of the private university has led to an increased need to meet the needs of the students, its consumers. Ms Oberholzer reasoned that one or other model over-rides others in different stages of the development of societies.

Ms Oberholzer went on to address a second potential challenge for quality assurance—a second instance in which quality assurance might not work—namely, the situation in which groups have *conflicting ideas* on what quality means. In other words, if the implicit or explicit purpose for which an evaluation is being conducted is not 'bought into' by all the participants—or if the perceived benefits are not equally valued—evaluation may not impact on quality as intended. Ms Oberholzer emphasized the importance of those being evaluated understanding why quality assurance is taking place. She stressed that if people buy into the reasons for the evaluation, their commitment to the processes increases.

Quality assurance serves different purposes. *External evaluation systems* tend to be driven by challenges. Examples of these challenges include the decline or non-achievement of standards—the 'massification' of education and the notion that if there are large numbers of people, quality

cannot possibly survive. Political dispensations often want to push or drive particular ideas. It also happens that the needs of the workplace and labour market in an increasingly competitive global market are not met by the current system, and quality assurance is necessary to make sure that institutions produce what is needed. Further, there is the requirement of efficiency in the expenditure of public funds and the desire to alleviate wastage of money by schools and universities. That is, there must be accountability for expenditure. There is a need for protection in the face of economic competition from international providers.

Internal evaluation systems on the other hand tend to be driven by the twin desires to do the best, and to be seen to be doing so, in particular contexts.

Ms Oberholzer noted that the following question is key for quality assurance: *Is it really necessary to externally validate specific standard(s) in order to trust the quality of an institution or programme?* A third purpose of quality assurance is that it is intended to establish a system-wide trust, that is, quality assurance establishes if institutions are 'good and reliable'. As already discussed, quality assurance defines the quality of a system as a whole, and whether or not funds are being spent appropriately within it. This process sets up a 'referee and player' situation where standards are independent and the person passing commentary is or should be, separate from them.

This process is particularly important when considering institutions that take money from students, because if student numbers ensuring the existence of institutions depend on how many passes there are, there is a danger these students will perform 'brilliantly' on paper and not have the competences to match their on-paper results. It is also necessary to establish if these institutions are operating in a manner that serves social and political accountability. Quality assurance processes can find out if the specified intentions of institutions are in line what the country in which they are situated wants to do with skills development.

Ms Oberholzer briefly mentioned other purposes of quality assurance. It can monitor the issues of credit recognition and transfer—an important role given the current focus on educational mobility. It can lead to the improvement of provision and customer satisfaction—important aspects in private provision.

Ms Oberholzer then returned to the issue of the impact of quality assurance, and the need for quality standards and criteria to have particular characteristics. She re-iterated that the standards and criteria used for measuring quality form the basis on which the definition of quality is concretised and made explicit. It is therefore essential that these standards and criteria are made explicit, and that those in the evaluation system 'buy in' to the ideas. The focus of quality assurance is linked to one or other purpose as just discussed. Ms Oberholzer referred back to Ms Rabe's point about specification. She noted that the definitions of standards and criteria, although needing to be explicit, should neither be too detailed nor too vague—if educational outcomes are too vague, the door is opened to subjectivity and wide interpretation. Ms Oberholzer noted the move in South Africa, 'towards less rather than more'. South Africans have 'walked the walk' of having 550 criteria that need to be measured in an evaluation—and questioned if moving down to the current 209 is going to make a big difference. Given the recognition that too many of these detailed specifications have problematic implications, there is now a shift towards broader rather than minutely described specifications. Ms Oberholzer cautioned that as soon as there is such broadness, problems with subjectivity start to emerge. She re-iterated what Ms Rabe had raised earlier—that what cannot be counted also counts, or has relevance.

Ms Oberholzer said that she was reminded of a story that captures the 'quantitative versus qualitative' issue in quality assurance. In a girls' school in the United States of America, learners were putting on lipstick and then kissing the mirrors in the toilets. Every morning when the janitor came to clean the toilets the mirrors were covered with marks that were difficult to remove. The headmistress forbade the girls from these activities, to no avail. Then one day she decided to bring a classroom of girls into the toilets with the janitor so that he could explain the arduous process involved in removing the lipstick from the mirrors. The janitor then demonstrated by picking up the squeegee and putting it into a toilet before wiping the mirror. Ms Oberholzer said that needless to say, the practise of kissing the mirror stopped! She used this story to make the point that there was both teaching and *education* in this situation—sometimes education and the lessons learned are not as tangible as are some aspects of teaching.

She feels it important to bear in mind that some aspects of education are quantitative while others are qualitative; some things that are intrinsic and implicit are not easy to measure. Only quantifiable aspects are assessed. However, the results of final examinations do not necessarily correlate with the quality of teaching.

Ms Oberholzer felt that another important aspect of 'standards and criteria' is the impact of institutional change on quality, and the timing of evaluations. Evaluations might come at a time when a faculty or school realise they have problems—institutions might then institute series of changes but these advances can take up to three years to filter through in a quantifiable way. If an evaluation happens at the 'wrong time' for a particular institution the 'reality' emerging from the evaluation might not accurately reflect its potential.

When speaking about 'standards and criteria' Ms Oberholzer felt that there is always the already-discussed tension between specification and ambiguity, that is, vagueness and explicit detail. She suggested that it is important to recognise that the sum of parts does not necessarily mean the whole. If all the little quality assurance bits are done correctly and then put together, this does not add up to a quality institution. Ms Oberholzer suggested that there are other factors which need to be taken into account.

A third reason—in addition to notions of quality having little meaning independently of context, and the circumstance in which there are conflicting ideas of quality—that quality assurance might not help, is if the *credibility of the evaluators or the process is in doubt*. In other words, if the person or institution being evaluated fundamentally questions the competence of the evaluators or the adequacy of the process—quality assurance might not have a positive impact. For Ms Oberholzer there is—more or less—general acceptance that good quality assurance methodology has the following four factors.

Firstly, recognition that quality assurance is a partnership between evaluators and evaluated. If not, there will be power imbalances and some level of pretence and misrepresentation of information. Second, in most quality assurance models self-assessment happens as a preview: institutions gather evidence and look into their own systems. Third, self-assessment is

followed by external assessment such as peer-review and site visits—where evidence is reviewed until there is agreement. Fourth, there is properly processed feedback. Ms Oberholzer questioned the need for publication of reports in this context.

There are recognized difficulties with quality assurance processes. These processes include potential lack of *respect for standards and indicators of quality* because they do not reflect perceptions of quality in the evaluation context. There is a need to match criteria to progression of the evaluation processes and the progress made by institutions. For instance, a new institution starts out by looking for basic minimum standards but then three years later those criteria are no longer relevant. The criteria therefore need to shift as the institution moves. There is also the 'non-absolutist nature' of standards and indicators: no matter how many words are used to describe them there will still be differing perceptions of what they mean. It is also important to question whether standards accommodate diversity. Only those aspects falling within institutions' areas of responsibility can be assessed. Ms Oberholzer questioned whether assessment should favour empirical measurement or whether it should accept subjectivity of judgement—subjectivity being fine as long as everyone is agreed on this.

Ms Oberholzer suggested that there are also difficulties around the *effectiveness of evaluation instruments:* if these instruments are not perceived to be doing what they are supposed to be doing, quality assurance processes will not be trusted. Evaluation instruments need to be appropriate for the indicators being measured. They should also 'not waste the time of the evaluated'. The evaluation process needs to result in useful feedback. Criteria must be structured in such a way that feedback can benefit the institution as a whole.

Finally Ms Oberholzer stressed the importance of *respect for the evaluators*—she felt that this aspect could never be overstated. Evaluators need to have sufficient experience in the aspects being quality assured; in the education field in general, and in the particular sector. Respect for the evaluators is essential for the building of trust.

Ms Oberholzer stated that quality assurance would not bring benefits *if the outcome of the process, and way the outcome of the evaluation is used, are perceived*

to be problematic. Quality assurance can be used as a 'carrot', rewarding those who do well or as a 'stick' used punish under-performing institutions. A developmental strategy helps institutions and gives them time to grow but in the interim one can question what is happening to the students—are they getting a fair deal? But the same question could be asked if an institution is shut down. Ms Oberholzer stressed that in fairness, any evaluation report needs to include an appeals process, especially if report is given to a third party or made public, as it would impact on operations.

Ms Oberholzer noted that there is sufficient evidence to show that quality assurance has a positive impact on institutions, especially first evaluations as these raise awareness of what quality means and how it manifests itself in institutions. Quality assurance develops awareness of areas of weakness and strength; changes are implemented as a result. She questions whether quality assurance processes actually develop internal quality cultures over time however, especially after second and third evaluations. Research generally suggests that once a culture has been internalised, it is difficult to shift.

Ms Oberholzer questioned whether evaluations are sometimes just about window-dressing—making institutions look good because evaluators are visiting. She feels that there is a general aversion to 'policing', that is, external quality assurance being seen as prescriptive rather than accommodating difference. She pointed to debates on whether quality assurance moneys had been well spent—the direct costs of quality assurance are often large as a result of the people-hours required to set up the documentation, evaluation systems and processes as well as interventions for improvement. She feels that in a country like South Africa, decisions need to be made about where quality assurance processes are able to have the greatest impact; the right priorities need to be set with respect to who needs to be evaluated first.

In conclusion, Ms Oberholzer stressed that it is almost impossible to find standards and criteria; processes; and then people who are able to make acceptable judgements in those processes, on those standards and criteria, independently of the value-laden and context-defined environments within which specific institutions operate.

Introduction of the third speaker

Mr. Pampallis introduced the last speaker, Dr Ben Parker, Director of Research at the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). Dr Parker is also a visiting Associate Professor at the School of Education at the University of the Witwatersrand. Before joining SAQA Dr Parker was a Senior Researcher at the Centre for Education Policy Development; Executive Dean at the University of Fort Hare; and Professor of Ethics and Professor and Head of the School of Education at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. During 1999 and 2000 he was seconded to the national Department of Education (DoE) to take up the position of Director: Higher Education and Teacher Education Programmes. There he was involved in developing norms and standards for educators. He was responsible for leading the process whereby colleges of education were incorporated into Higher Education institutions. In 2001 and 2002 he served as a member of the Ministerial Study Team appointed to review the implementation of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). In 2004 and 2005 he was Chairperson of the Ministerial Committee on Rural Education. He has a doctorate in Philosophy and extensive experience in education.

How can quality assurance improve quality?
Dr Ben Parker, Director of Research
South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA)

Dr Parker indicated that quite a few of the points he wished to make had been covered already, so he would move through these issues quickly. He felt it had been clearly conveyed that quality is like an elusive butterfly—it cannot be caught. What it means in particular contexts depends on what is being assessed, measured or evaluated in that context, and for what purposes. Dr Parker aimed to focus primarily on the challenges of quality and curriculum assessment from the perspective of National Qualifications Framework (NQF) standards.

He began by speaking about quality standards in the context of the NQF. He noted the rapid emergence of NQFs over the last twenty years,

pointing out that this trend reflects a fundamental shift in discourses about quality—a shift to seeking to bring quality to the extrinsic purposes of education.
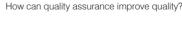
Dr Parker suggested that there are three primary extrinsic purposes to which education is being linked, in the quality debates. The first is *transparency*—that quality should no longer be an occult, esoteric servant of education. The second is *accountability*—that quality should be linked to national interest. Whether this interest is citizenship, equity, non-racism, non-sexism or social responsibility, education must in some sense be accountable to national interests. The third extrinsic purpose is *relevance*, or the concern that education be linked to the needs of the labour market, that is, education must be linked to employability.

Dr Parker strongly agreed with what Ms Rabe had stated earlier about how the recent market-driven initiatives on quality assurance reflect the hegemonic influence of quality management approaches. He pointed out that these approaches have been developed primarily in the *production* sectors of the economy and especially in the manufacturing services sector where the focus is on the observable, measurable properties of a product. For him the question is: *How relevant is that quality management approach to education?* He argued that this approach leads to the standardization of quality, the homogenization of education. The concern here, is that the focus on *extrinsic* factors causes the *intrinsic* purposes of education—the value of education in its own right—to get lost.

Dr Parker then went on to explore the question: *Why NQFs?*. He suggested firstly, that NQFs have emerged as a result of a 'Thatcherite' demand for accountability to the state and relevance to the economy. These tendencies can be seen very strongly in the growing world-wide trend to commodify and privatise Higher Education. The second driving force behind the emergence of the NQFs has been a growing need for the mobility of cognitive capital (knowledge and skills) in the market place. These two reasons make NQFs an almost inevitable reality. The question then becomes: *What kind of NQF?*—and this idea is directly linked to how one understands quality assurance.

Dr Parker suggested that the major reason for this demand for accountability and relevance, the focus on extrinsic purposes, is strongly

linked to the breakdown of trust in modern society. In previous times for example, universities were seen as bearers of a sacred trust. That faith has broken down, and has been replaced by contracts between Higher Education, State, and Business. The verification of the public good of education is seen to require regulation.

Dr Parker then turned attention to the scope and purposes of NQFs in relation to quality assurance. He pointed out the usefulness of drawing a distinction between two archetypes of NQFs which distinguish between on one hand, frameworks that describe and co-ordinate what is, and on the other, frameworks that describe what *ought* to be. This distinction creates a split between developed and developing countries. The emergence of NQFs in developed countries have largely been *descriptions*: they are about describing what *already* exists, and about establishing communicative devices to get institutions or sectors to talk to each other. In contrast, in developing countries the emergence of NQFs leads to the emergence of strongly *prescriptive* elements and a transformative dimension—education and training needs to transformed and the NQF is 'how it is going to be done'. The prescriptive framework places great emphasis on regulation, and more and more technical regulation is brought to bear on governing education and training. In the descriptive type of framework on the other hand, educational institutions and providers subscribe only to the systematic processes of refining standards.

Although it is useful to make this distinction, most frameworks contain elements of both the descriptive and prescriptive approaches. Dr Parker noted that in the South African case, there is a shift from the prescriptive to the descriptive. Both types of framework are used to steer the quality of education. Both refer for example, to relevance and accountability. The steering happens primarily through the determination of standards; the accreditation of providers and programmes; through public funding *formulas* for providers and programmes; and through periodic evaluation. In South Africa in Higher Education there are programme-qualification mixed funding formulas; a few DoE programmes; accreditation, review, and monitoring processes administered by the Council on Higher Education (CHE), and the evaluation-registration processes of the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). Dr Parker pointed out that all

of these institutions, in one way or another, steer the quality of education and training systems in the country.

The second major function of an NQF is facilitating articulation within and between the education and training systems; between these systems and the labour market; and between this whole system and the state. NQFs facilitate articulation between different providers within the Higher Education system for example, between one university and another. The biggest challenge for NQFs is smoothing articulation *within* systems—in other words, between subsystems—between schooling and Higher Education; between training and skills development on one hand, and Higher Education on the other.

Dr Parker named a third major function of NQFs, namely their 'comparability' role. In some sectors, articulation itself depends on comparability—articulation can only work if the connecting components are comparable—but Dr Parker felt it important to separate the two aspects out as ideas. The comparability function is largely a consequence of global pressures. Pushing qualifications to become comparable across institutional and national boundaries leads to a need for these qualifications to be a reliable currency—there is homogenization of qualifications. Dr Parker suggested that what NQFs and extrinsic or quality management perspectives are doing, is trying to create homogenized quality that is comparable across the boundaries of different nations and institutions. This trend is most apparent in the attempt to build credit accumulation and transfer systems (CAT) and in recognition of prior learning (RPL). Both the CAT and RPL systems are fundamental boundary crossing mechanisms but can only work as such if there is something that can be compared. Dr Parker argued that it is here that the central role of standards can be seen. Fundamentally NQFs depend on standards; it is not possible to have an NQF without standards. Standards are the currency of NQFs that help them to fulfill their various functions. This reliance on standards assumes that there is something that can be compared. Increasingly, standards must define what can be identified as quality.

The question then becomes: *What is a standard?* Dr Parker proffered two dominant interpretations of 'standards'. The traditional one—which Ms Rabe referred to as implicit—denotes a standard of *achievement*; high

standards are maintained. A more recent interpretation of standards is that they describe *performance indicators* for *competencies* linked to a *hierarchy of levels.*

Dr Parker suggested three approaches to the *setting* of standards. There is what is broadly referred to as the input model that focuses on institutions and their curricula. This model hones in on curriculum, pedagogy and assessment practices prevalent at the institutions concerned. A second major approach is the *outcomes and competencies* model, one emphasizing the outputs of learning. Dr Parker noted that this model comprises the dominant approach in South Africa. A third model focuses on *knowledge fields and disciplines*, and can be *input* or *outcomes* based, depending on how it is approached.

The first input-type approach is currently out of favour; NQF and quality assurance institutions are increasingly reliant on the second outputs-type approach. For example, in the European Higher Education field, traditional models and ways of expressing qualification structures are giving away to systems based on explicit reference points; level-to-level indicators; subject benchmarks; and qualifications descriptors. Dr Parker asserted that this approach is not what one would necessarily expect from the European Higher Education field.

He proposed that the third approach is the most interesting but noted that there is no NQF system in the world that has yet tried to develop it. In the *knowledge field* approach it may be possible to use shorthand descriptions of subsets of knowledge fields or disciplines to express what students would achieve on successful completion of whole qualifications. Detailed descriptions of knowledge fields would be left to the 'grammars of the fields', for example, the vertical and horizontal knowledge structures in the fields concerned. This approach has never been developed—it is still bedeviled by the indeterminacy of translation and interpretation involved in capturing short hand descriptions of the complexities of the knowledge systems.

Dr Parker named the biggest challenge for quality assurance, as being at the macro systemic framework level: how can a scheme be developed for the comparability and quality of educational offerings, without interfering with national institutional autonomy? How do systems respect diversity

in the face of homogenizing forces? Another way of expressing these challenges would be to say that there is a tension between, on one hand, the need for criteria and integration within an education framework and, on the other hand, the need for relevance; accountability; responsibility. There are the requirements of universality, commonality, and context specificity. For Dr Parker these challenges are fundamental ones when talking about quality assurance, particularly in the context of NQFs.

A further challenge is what he described as the tension between disciplinary differentiation on one hand, and transferability on the other. How to retain what is distinctive about disciplines and their discourses, when moving across disciplines?

Dr Parker pointed out that on one hand there is a general view that Higher Education tends to be exclusive and conservative about knowledge and access to knowledge. On the other side there is another general perception that knowledge is like land, in that it just needs to be grabbed and occupied—and that the problem with Higher Education is that it will not allow people grab it! Dr Parker went on to say that these poles represent the kind of debate that speaks directly to the question of quality. He posed a further question: *Do you become so relevant and so populist that you totally evacuate the concept of knowledge, or do you become so conservative and so preservationist that you just speak to 'me' [a small group of people]?* The challenge as Dr Parker sees it is that the very generality used to create comparability is so broad that it ceases to serve as a meaningful basis for standards generation and differentiation. In other words, both outcome statements and knowledge statements are too generic to be used for the purposes of evaluation.

Dr Parker then turned attention to the impossibility of outcome- and knowledge statements being used as standards. He suggested that the argument had been extremely well made by Dr Matseleng Allais and others, that trying to describe quality up front through ever-increasing levels of specification and complexity is a doomed enterprise. This attempt at up-front definition of quality assumes that all outcomes and knowledge statements are transparent descriptions of competency—an incorrect assumption. The design-down approach that begins with outcomes and knowledge statements, and leads to approval of qualifications or

successful quality assurance evaluations, becomes a matter of compliance with technical regulations, rather than a fit-for-purpose practice-oriented approach. Dr Parker suggested that the big danger of a public management approach to quality and quality management systems is that this type of approach fails to distinguish sufficiently between form and substance, between sense and relevance—the focus is mainly on the form. The concern becomes 'let's make sure we do things right' rather than, 'let's do the right thing'. Dr Parker suggested that there is a lot of this approach happening in South Africa. There is a preoccupation with doing things right, but too often the right thing is not being done.

Dr Parker ended by saying that if quality assurance and improving quality is going to be discussed, then it needs to be recognized that institutional ecologies and communities of practice are far stronger determinants of quality than are NQFs and [competence] standards. He argued that if the intention is to improve quality, then the focus needs to be on institutional ecology. He also argued however, that NQFs can play a modest descriptive and communicative function within an array of systemic and institutional quality development processes. Quality assurance should be focused on both enhancing the capabilities of institutions, and ecologies and communities of practice on one hand, and in developing standardizing descriptors on the other. This two-pronged strategy should affect both internal and external dimensions of quality. The descriptors need to be understood as being no more than short-hand descriptors of knowledge outcomes, and as being used purely for the purposes of information.

Finally, Dr Parker returned to the question: *Can quality be enhanced by efforts to evaluate it?* He felt the answer is both a 'yes' and a 'no', as it depends on what is meant by 'quality' and the 'evaluation of quality'. He suggested that some evaluative practices do enhance quality, and that others do not. He then added that without any evaluative practices, quality will not be enhanced.

Discussion

Mr Pampallis thanked the three speakers for their insightful, well thought-through, and thought-provoking presentations. He then invited discussion from the audience.

A participant began by asking Dr Parker why articulation has not worked in spite of the NQF having existed for some time in South Africa. Dr Parker responded by pointing out that the answer to this question had been embedded in his presentation—that is, that South Africa has taken the route of a highly prescriptive, transformative NQF. The mechanism of change has been learning outcomes. The word 'outcome' is however slippery: on one level everyone believes that education should have outcomes. In fact, many of the people who criticize SAQA themselves believe in the measuring of learner achievement—and learner achievement is an outcome of educational practice. Dr Parker went on to say that there are at least two different interpretations of the word 'outcome'. South Africa went for a highly prescriptive conception of the term, and has lost sight of the competences associated with outcomes. The substance of outcomes has been replaced by their form. The NQF can therefore not facilitate articulation because it has been highly prescriptive, and uses as its means of articulation, an approach which is fundamentally educationally unsound. Dr Parker then raised the question: *Can NQFs contribute towards articulation?*, and suggested that the answer is 'yes', provided that the NQF is descriptive and used as a platform that works incrementally by building communities of people in different institutions and sectors. He added that this process is a slow one: in the Scottish qualifications framework only sixteen qualifications attained full articulation in fifteen years. The process is slow because for example, in order to articulate training and Higher Education, an understanding of differing forms of knowledge and assessment is required. Ms Oberholzer added that the notion of articulation boils down to the level of trust between institutions: for her the question arises, as to how this trust is established. She argued that trust is not created through quality assurance, but rather rests on the agreement between two entities, that they are going to allow articulation to take place between them.

Another participant in the audience commented that the moment the quality assurance system 'bites' a person who could have participated in the processes, they turn around and disown the system. Therefore the notion of trust, communities of practice and credibility become very problematic. In other words, people buy into the system when things are going well, but if this success is not the case, a number of challenges arise.

Another participant commented on internal and external evaluations in Higher Education institutions, suggesting that there is tension and a lack of balance between the two. Also, that there is often a lack of trust and openness between evaluators and those evaluated.

A further participant commented that he was interested in the use of the word 'tension' in the presentations and felt that it needs careful attention—he argued that it is unlikely that this word will ever be expunged and will always be a given. He then suggested that when speaking about the different dimensions to the very complicated process of quality assurance and how one manages productivity, the notion of tension is essential—it needs to be analyzed and understood with intention and creativity. He then asked as to where, in the notion of quality assurance, is responsibility located? He noted that he had heard about a 'diversity of responsibilities', and would not easily be able to answer the following questions: *Where in the education system as a whole, is the responsibility for inducting young learners into questions around xenophobia? In other words: Where in the quality assurance process might the responsibility be found for this and other important issues?*

Ms Rabe indicated that she was pleased that the notions of tension and balance had come through strongly in the presentations—between for example, form and substance, and external and internal evaluations. She feels that these tensions need to be monitored and unpacked on an ongoing basis. She stressed the importance of striking a balance and, depending on the circumstances, not seeing things in limited ways—in terms of seeing them in either one too-tightly bounded way or another.

Ms Oberholzer suggested that there is a tendency in South African society to legislate and to adopt stances quite starkly in one or another way. She feels that this approach is a mistake, and emphasized *managing* tensions rather than trying to get rid of them—as tensions will always remain. She agreed that it is very important to be conscious of tensions.

She added that on the issue of trust, there is a notion that trust exists if people agree on something and that if they do not agree then the system must be flawed and that something is incorrect. She gave by way of an example 'marriage and trust', pointing out that trust is not based on agreement because spouses can never agree on everything. She feels that trust cannot be conditional and that if a person is part of system, he or she has chosen to participate in this way and needs to take the good as well as the bad parts of the system—but added that this acceptance is more easily spoken about than accomplished.

Dr Parker said that he feels that the issue of trust is fascinating and fundamental to the issue of quality assurance. He questioned how to establish trust in a society full of risk and uncertainty. The old traditional forms of trust have broken down, so what replaces them? He indicated that he concurs with Ms Oberholzer in that trust does not necessarily mean agreement—and that for him it does mean negotiating contracts. He argued that South Africans have gone wrong in that they have accepted contracts that have been imposed upon them by the new neo-liberal public management movements. South Africans have therefore not got down to learning and engaging in heavy negotiation around the nature of the contract.