

Quality Assurance in Education

Stephanie Matseleng Allais

**Issues in Education Policy
Number 5**



Centre for Education Policy Development

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Preface

The series *Issues in Education Policy* consists of a number of booklets on key issues in education and training policy in South Africa. Each booklet deals with one such issue and aims to give the reader, in plain English, an overview of the topic and its implications for various stakeholders.

The intended readership includes a wide range of people with an interest in the education and training system – members of Parliament or of provincial legislatures, teachers, trade unionists, employers, student and community activists, education department officials, journalists, governors of educational institutions, members of local or provincial education and training councils, and interested members of the general public.

Each booklet gives an outline of the issue that it deals with, explains its importance and why it is contentious or divisive (where that is the case). It summarises current policy and its development – for example, why certain policies were made in the first place and under what circumstances, what the experience of implementing the policies has been, what their supporters and detractors have to say about them, and the main findings of research and policy evaluations. There is also a list of further reading.

After having read this booklet, readers should have a basic understanding of the topic. They should be able to understand more complex material on the issue, participate in public debates and assess new policy initiatives.

Abbreviations and Acronyms

FET	Further Education and Training
GET	General Education and Training
HEQC	Higher Education Quality Committee
IQMS	Integrated Quality Management System
ISO	International Organization for Standardization
MBA	Masters of Business Administration
MEd	Masters of Education
PIRLS	Progress in International Reading Literacy Study
QC	Quality Council
QCTO	Quality Council for Trades and Occupations
SACMEQ	Southern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality
SAQA	South African Qualifications Authority
SETA	Sectoral Education and Training Authority
TIMSS	Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study
Umalusi	Umalusi: Council for Quality Assurance in General and Further Education and Training
UNISA	University of South Africa

Quality Assurance in Education

Introducing Quality Assurance

“Quality assurance” is a term that is new in education, but that has rapidly become very important. What exactly is quality assurance? Why do we need it? Does it really improve quality? Is quality assurance in education something different from quality assurance in general?

This booklet aims to provide an introduction to quality assurance in education, briefly describe the organisations in South Africa responsible for quality assurance, and raise some of the debates and critiques of quality assurance in education. It is merely an introduction, which tries to explain in ordinary English the terms and systems which often seem to be rather confusing. A list of readings is provided at the end of the booklet for those who want to learn more about quality assurance, education policy related to quality assurance, or broader discussions about quality in education.

A Very Short History of Quality Assurance

Quality assurance has its roots in large-scale manufacturing. Keeping track of production quality became increasingly important during the second half of the twentieth century. At that time, a whole profession developed

around the idea of “quality”, as well as related systems, processes and organisations. Since it first emerged, the “quality profession” has developed dramatically, so that now it is a whole area of work in itself.

Since the pre-industrial guild systems, in which craftspeople would get together to control the secrets of their particular crafts, there have been bodies which played a role in ensuring quality and standards in different areas of society. When individual craftspeople made their own goods, they could control everything – the quality of what they produced was in their own hands. Producing it well could have been a matter of individual pride, or they could have been conforming to the standards of their guilds.

As industry developed and large mechanised factories started to be the dominant mode of manufacture, each individual worker started to produce only small bits of a total product. They had no control over the end product, and had less interest in it. So, to make sure that their factories were producing items that did not have defects, factory owners introduced inspectors. Inspectors would check a sample of completed items, assuming that their quality was representative of all the items produced. This led to the development of a whole series of different ways of trying to reduce the number of defects in manufactured items. These are usually referred to as “quality control” mechanisms.

As companies tried to find ways of reducing the number of defects in their products, more complex control mechanisms were developed. “Quality assurance” came out of attempts to prevent defects from occurring, instead of only checking up on finished products. Using the knowledge of engineers as well as people who started to develop expertise in quality management, systems and processes were developed to check on quality at all stages of production.

“Total quality management” is the approach which is most often associated with quality assurance. It refers to systems which are developed to monitor all processes that are part of the work of an organisation. Supporters of total quality management systems believe that their systems are different from

earlier ideas of quality control. Instead of only looking at finished products, all the steps of the production process are examined.

A number of different commercial organisations have developed quality management tools and systems. Businesses which subscribe are then evaluated against the total quality management systems. One of the best-known total quality management systems is ISO 9000. ISO stands for International Organization for Standardization. A business or organisation which subscribes to ISO 9000 is provided with a set of procedures which are supposed to cover all the key processes in the business. Under ISO, there is a set of “accreditation and certification” bodies which monitor the key processes of the subscribing organisation, to check that they are operating as they are supposed to. These bodies check that records are kept for all key processes. Advocates of this and similar models claim to ensure that organisations constantly improve at all levels.

Total quality management systems generally use the idea of “accreditation”. A business which subscribes to a total quality management system, and is audited by the appropriate organisation, is given accreditation. In many industries, accreditation by a body like ISO 9000 is very important, and is used as a way of showing the outside world that the business takes sufficient care of ensuring the quality of its products or services.

Accreditation might be essential in order for a business or organisation to have a license to operate within a specific area in a specific country, or it can be voluntary and then be used by the business as a marketing tool.

Accreditation is not necessarily linked to total quality management systems. It can also be used to describe any system in which institutions have to meet specific requirements in order to be given a license to operate within a certain area.

With the move from examining finished products to examining systems and processes, quality management started to be introduced to other areas of the economy. Quality management systems are now compulsory in

many areas of work, and not just manufacture. For example, all shipping companies must comply with international safety management codes. In this, as in many areas, quality assurance organisations exist to check up on the compliance of different companies. More and more, quality assurance has become an accepted part of business.

Since the 1970s, governments have been influenced by business models. This has partly been based on a belief that business models are more efficient than the traditional bureaucratic models of governments. Also, governments have tried to privatise certain areas of operation, or to privatise some aspects of areas which used to be seen as government responsibility. Both of these factors have led to governments being increasingly concerned with the regulation of different areas of work. As a result, governments have started to adopt ideas such as quality assurance from business.

In nearly all countries, governments have some responsibility for education. This has led to the introduction of quality assurance as an important part of the organisation of education systems.

Debates about Quality Assurance

The lead parachute: following all the right processes to do the wrong thing?

One of the criticisms of total quality management systems is that they lead to an organisation putting all its energy into compliance, in order to get accreditation with one of the total quality management systems, instead of thinking creatively and consciously about quality. Linked to this is the criticism that many of the available total quality management systems are very time-consuming and complex. If accreditation with one of them is necessary or seen as desirable, then an organisation is forced to spend a lot of time ensuring that it will meet the audit criteria. Ironically, this can

be at the expense of really focusing on quality! This is sometimes seen as the “lead parachute” conundrum. A lead parachute is a way of expressing the idea that all the right processes can be followed, exactly according to specification, but the processes can be doing the wrong thing. Obviously, the idea of a lead parachute is an exaggeration, but it is used to draw attention to the following points:

- It is more important for an organisation to be thinking actively and creatively about what it is trying to achieve, than to put its energy into complying with the standards of an external body.
- Too much focus on the details and specifications of each individual process can lead to too little focus on overall objectives.

In other words, too much focus on compliance with process specifications can lead to individual workers not using their judgement and expertise appropriately. Linked to this criticism is the fact that most total quality management systems originate in the field of manufacture. Some critics argue that they are more appropriate for manufacture, where there is a clear product to be created, than for other areas.

The audit conundrum: who is the right person to make a judgement about someone else’s work?

Quality assurance relies on outside auditors coming inside a business or organisation to evaluate how well it is doing. (This is also true of some more traditional ways of monitoring quality, like inspection models in school systems, which are discussed below.) One of the criticisms of this is that sometimes the people doing audits are not experts in the thing that is being done, but rather are experts in the quality management system that they are using. The development of the quality management profession has led to the existence of people who are experts at auditing. However, can expert auditors make judgements about processes and systems in an area in which they are not experts? They may be good at checking whether the business has correctly used all the specifications according to the requirements of

the total quality management system, but they may not have a good sense of what it is that the organisation is trying to do. An organisation which is producing lead parachutes, but complying with all its process specifications, could, in theory, receive a good audit.

To some extent this is inevitable – people inside a job will always understand more about it than people who are not involved in it on a daily basis. The extent to which quality assurance or inspection systems can work will depend on how well this problem can be solved. One way of solving it is to try to ensure that the people doing the evaluation are, as far as possible, experts in the area that they are evaluating.

Who guards the guardians?

This criticism goes as follows: We don't trust institutions to judge themselves, so we want someone to check up on them. But how do we know we can trust those doing the checking up? Do we have auditing bodies to audit auditing bodies? Can there be inspectors of inspectors? Where does it stop? Who decides if a total quality management organisation is appropriately using its own total quality management system, or if it is making correct judgements about other organisations' use of total quality management systems?

Once again, this is a problem which is inevitable, and probably one that cannot be solved. Obviously, for the sake of practicality, there cannot be layers and layers of organisations evaluating each other. There are ways of creating checks and balances, and of ensuring the accountability of the organisations responsible for quality assurance or monitoring. Nonetheless, it is an issue which should always be of concern when considering any kind of quality monitoring or improvement system.

Different Ways of Thinking about Quality Assurance in Education

Education systems have always had some kinds of checks and balances. These are put in place to keep track of quality or standards in education institutions and systems, and to try to improve them. Only recently, however, have these been referred to as quality assurance. In some ways, quality assurance in education can be seen as building on the traditional checks and balances in the systems. In other ways, quality assurance in education is something rather different, and is new to education. This section starts by considering the traditional checks and balances in the South African education system. It then examines models which are more explicitly within the “quality assurance” realm.

Traditional ways of monitoring and improving quality in education

External examinations

The South African school system, like school systems in many countries, has a very long tradition of external examinations. External exams are tests that are set by central bodies, outside of individual schools; schools then enrol their pupils for these exams.

This type of system ensures that all students in all participating schools write the same exams, in order to get some insight into whether they have attained similar levels of education. Thus, exams are often thought about from the point of view of individual students – they are used to check what individual students have learned, and to give them certificates on the basis of their achievements in the exam. However, they are also an important mechanism for checking up on whether teachers and schools are teaching the prescribed curriculum appropriately. If students in each school only wrote tests and exams set by their teachers, then lazy, corrupt or incompetent teachers could set exams that are much too easy. External examinations are a way of ensuring that all students write exams of the same standard. They

are also a way of checking up on schools and individual teachers, by seeing how well their students perform. Governments and parents can take action if, for example, a school has a high failure rate in the external exam.

In South Africa, external exams are also used as a way to monitor and improve quality within colleges and for adult education.

Within higher education, South Africa also has a system of external examining which is used to monitor and maintain standards. For each examination that is set by one university, an expert in the same field at a different university checks the question paper, as well as a sample of the students' scripts. External examiners also provide comments on the standard of the course which is taught. So, through this system, there is some control over what happens in different institutions. The system is known as "peer review" – because, it is a peer (an equal) within the same field, and not a government bureaucrat or external quality assurance agent, who is checks up on the quality of courses, question papers and the standard of marking. One of the features of a peer review system is that peers decide on what basis they will evaluate and judge each others' work. Experts within particular fields are seen as the best people to make decisions about quality.

There are many criticisms of exams as mechanisms for checking on individual learners, on teachers and on schools. Within schooling, colleges and adult education, some of the criticisms of exams include:

- They tend to be once-off events, and some people think this is unfair as learners may perform poorly on the day because of pressure or illness or other reasons which have nothing to do with their ability and knowledge of the subject.
- They tend to be pen-and-paper tests, which only test limited skills, and therefore discriminate against learners who excel in other areas such as practical or oral work.
- They encourage "teaching to the test" and thereby narrow the curriculum.

- They are unfair to learners because not all teachers prepare their classes in the same way for exams.
- The standard of the exams may not be the same from year to year.

Within higher education the criticisms are different. The main criticisms are:

- **Corruption:** Academics in one institution may ask their friends in other institutions to review their courses and exams, and in return review their friends' courses, mutually agreeing not to point out bad practice.
- **Incompetence:** If peer reviewers are not sufficiently expert in their subject, they may not see the weaknesses of the course or exam they are reviewing.
- **Lack of seriousness:** Some people argue that the peer review system is not regarded sufficiently seriously by academics, and that not enough attention is paid to it.
- **Lack of transparency:** Because of the nature of the peer review system, it is difficult for government to judge the performance of different universities.

There are many counter-arguments to these criticisms. In terms of schools, many people will argue that, despite their flaws, exams are the best and most fair way of testing students, and therefore teachers and schools. Similarly, with regard to higher education, the view of many is that there is no other way of making judgements, because only expert professionals within particular fields can make judgements about standards in their field. Others will argue that the skills tested in pen-and-paper tests – including reading and writing under pressure – are in fact important skills and part of what we would like to measure in students.

This booklet does not intend to discuss all the arguments for and against the use of external exams, but merely to note that exams are an important mechanism for monitoring quality in education, and that there are debates about them.

Systemic evaluation

South Africa uses systemic evaluation as a significant form of quality assurance, particularly at lower levels of the school system.

Systemic evaluation also involves the use of external exams. Here, however, they are not used to measure individuals. Tests are administered to a sample of schools. Individuals are not given their results, and whatever scores they achieve have no effect for individual students – they are not used for promotion or anything else. Instead, the government uses the results to see the standard of education in particular schools, as well as to see the standards of education in the country as a whole. For example, the government can get some indication of how much maths has been acquired by Grade 3 learners in the country, or what the reading level of Grade 6 learners is.

International tests can play a similar role. Countries participate in them to see how their school systems stand up to those in other countries. The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) are tests in which many countries enrol samples of learners, to see how levels of literacy, Maths and Science compare with those in other countries.

The criticisms of exams mentioned above are also made about systemic evaluation, as they are based on exams. Another criticism is that different schools may cover the curriculum in different orders. This means some schools may merely appear to be doing poorly, whereas in fact their learners have simply not yet been taught the areas which happen to be in the tests.

Like any mechanism for evaluation, much of the value of systemic evaluation depends on what action is taken after the testing is done. In South Africa, one of the criticisms is that the results are not made widely available, possibly because the systemic evaluations that have been done have revealed very low standards of literacy and Mathematics understanding in many schools.

International tests are also the subject of much debate. The relationship between local curricula and a test designed internationally is one of the particular areas of concern. Nonetheless, many experts argue that they do provide some information about the health of education systems relative to others internationally.

Inspection

Inspection has been a mechanism particularly associated with schools. Traditionally, it has been used to monitor the quality of teaching, as well as general aspects of schools. Inspectors could be subject experts who visit teachers to monitor how they are teaching, and give them support and advice. They could also be educational experts who monitor how schools are run, and provide advice to school heads. They also provide feedback to government about the levels of educational quality in schools. Government can then take remedial steps if necessary.

Like all methods of evaluating educational quality, inspection is the subject of debate. For example, some people argue that inspectors do not always understand the daily problems facing teachers, and can judge them too harshly. Others criticise governments for not doing enough to support schools after they have been inspected.

In South Africa, inspection has been particularly criticised. This is because the apartheid state abused the inspection system for political reasons. It used inspectors to spy on teachers, and to report on any who appeared to be critical of the government or who were straying from the rigid curriculum. Because of this, inspection became seen by many teachers in South Africa as an illegitimate way of monitoring education.

Quality assurance models

Since we have all these ways in which the quality of education is monitored and managed, why has quality assurance become an issue? Is it just a new name for old practices? In many instances this is probably the case. In many African countries, for example, school inspectorates have been renamed as

quality assurance divisions. This might not be a real change in policy or practice, but could reflect a desire to use more modern terminology and to be seen to be adapting to modern trends. So, to what extent have there been changes in practice in the way that educational quality is monitored?

Quality assurance as an explicit “movement” comes with some specific models.

Some educational institutions have adopted Total Quality Management Systems – perhaps to improve quality, or perhaps to improve their ability to market themselves. This type of approach is most common in vocational education institutions. In some cases it is necessary in order for programmes in specific areas to be recognised by appropriate professional organisations. For example, workshops have to be maintained at certain levels and according to certain standards.

Accreditation has also become an important mechanism within education. In order to be able to offer educational programmes in specific areas, institutions have to be accredited by the appropriate body. This could mean that they are required to adopt a Total Quality Management approach, or it could simply mean that they have to comply with set criteria. The idea behind accreditation is to protect the public from being tricked into paying for courses which in the end will not enable them to be employed in their chosen area; thus, accreditation is usually linked to vocational education.

South African Organisations Responsible for Quality Assurance in Education

As discussed in the first booklet in this series – *The National Qualifications Framework* (Issues in Education Policy, Number 1) – various aspects of South African education policy have been under review for some time. The outcome of this review will directly affect the nature of the bodies

responsible for quality assurance in South African education. This section, therefore, starts with a description of the organisations which existed at the time that this booklet was written. It then goes on to anticipate what changes are likely to be made in the next few years.

The current set-up

There are two quality assurance organisations which operate directly under the Minister of Education. The first is Umalusi, which monitors quality in general and further education and training. The second is the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC), which monitors quality in higher education. The Department of Education also plays a direct role in monitoring educational quality.

There are also organisations which operate under the Minister of Labour – the Sectoral Education and Training Authorities (SETAs). The SETAs conduct quality assurance in education programmes which are directly aimed at preparing people to work in specific industries or sectors of the economy. Similarly, professional bodies, which are often created by statutes of law, monitor educational programmes within specific areas.

The following sub-sections provide some information about each of these bodies.

Umalusi

Umalusi is the Council for Quality Assurance in General and Further Education and Training. It uses both traditional methods of monitoring quality in education and more modern quality assurance methods.

Umalusi is a statutory organisation. In other words, it exists because a law was passed by Parliament. It is responsible to the Minister of Education. It was created to monitor and improve the quality of general and further education and training in South Africa. Umalusi does this in three main ways:

- It monitors and moderates the achievements of students, primarily through external examinations. On the basis of this it issues certificates to students.
- It evaluates whether providers of education and training have the capacity to deliver and assess qualifications and learning programmes, and are doing so to expected standards of quality. This is done through an accreditation system, whereby educational institutions must meet criteria stipulated by Umalusi. However, at this point, Umalusi does not evaluate state schools at all. It only evaluates private schools, as well as colleges and adult education institutions. Umalusi also accredits assessment bodies, which then set the external examinations that are used to evaluate students.
- It evaluates the quality of qualifications. This mainly means looking at the curricula which belong to different qualifications, as well as the rules for how many subjects must be passed and at what level in order to obtain a qualification.

Many countries have a single examinations council that sets exams written by all students in the country at exit points from the schooling system – often the end of junior high school and the end of senior high school, but sometimes also the end of primary school. South Africa has a slightly different system. Umalusi is not directly involved in setting exams. Instead, it checks the quality of exams that assessment bodies are responsible for. It currently works with two main assessment bodies – the Department of Education and the Independent Examinations Board. More assessment bodies will probably be added as Umalusi starts to issue certificates for more qualifications.

Umalusi arranges for subject experts to look at the exam question papers and check that they are of the right standard. It also monitors that the exams are administered appropriately, that the marking is organised properly and is of the right standard, and that the marks which students obtain are of a similar standard to those in previous years. It looks at a small sample of assessments that have been done at schools (or colleges and adult education centres), and checks that these are of an appropriate standard.

Umalusi is a relatively new organisation. Its predecessor, the South African Certification Council, focused only on exams. Because of this, the monitoring and moderation of examinations has been one of the main focuses at Umalusi, and the other two functions described above are only gradually starting to be implemented.

Umalusi has mainly focused on the end point of formal schooling – the National Senior Certificate, which learners write at the end of Grade 12. Lower down the education system, it monitors adult education at the end of general education and training. It also monitors the college system, and issues certificates for college qualifications. As will be seen below, its area of operation is likely to increase in the coming years.

Department of Education

Responsibility for monitoring the quality of schools currently rests with the Department of Education. Because of the criticisms of inspectorate systems discussed above, the Department has attempted to develop alternative methods of evaluating schools. The system currently being implemented is called the Integrated Quality Management System (IQMS). It attempts to incorporate the evaluation of schools, the monitoring of teacher performance, and a system for supporting teachers in their work. However, the Department of Education has now publicly announced that it is considering returning to an independent inspectorate system instead.

As discussed above, the Department of Education also organises systemic evaluations (tests of samples of students) at the lower levels of the school system, to establish how much children in primary schools are learning. These tests look at numeracy and literacy levels.

Higher Education Quality Committee

The HEQC is a statutory body responsible for the quality assurance of all higher education in South Africa. Like Umalusi, it reports directly to the Minister of Education. It does four main things:

- It conducts audits of higher education institutions, mainly universities. This means that it checks up on institutions as a whole, to see how well they are teaching students, conducting research and engaging with communities. The HEQC evaluates both public and private institutions.
- It conducts national reviews within specific disciplines or qualification areas. For example, the HEQC recently conducted a review of all Masters of Education (MEd) programmes. Prior to this, it conducted a review of all Masters of Business Administration (MBA) programmes. On the basis of reviews like this, the HEQC might decide that certain institutions may no longer be allowed to continue offering programmes and qualifications in the area examined.
- It accredits learning programmes. That is, it decides whether or not specific institutions can offer specific programmes.
- It promotes quality. This involves sharing information and knowledge about quality assurance with people in higher education institutions, as well as preparing individuals and institutions to participate in the three processes described above.

Like Umalusi, the HEQC is a relatively new organisation. It has only recently started implementing its functions. Some of them are more advanced than others.

Professional associations

Many professions have associations which exist by statute in order to maintain standards of education and testing within their profession. These bodies will sometimes play a role in evaluating and licensing institutions which offer courses within their area of specialty. For example, the Engineering Council of South Africa checks up on the universities which offer engineering degrees, and only recognises them if they reach certain standards. Sometimes, professional bodies also set their own examinations, which must be passed by people wanting to join the profession. For example, the Institute of Chartered Accountants sets an examination that must be passed by anyone who wants to practise as a chartered accountant.

Sectoral Education and Training Authorities

SETAs exist in various sectors of the economy.¹ Examples are the Mining Qualifications Authority, the Wholesale and Retail SETA, the Media, Advertising, Publishing, Printing and Packaging SETA, and the Banking SETA. One of the current responsibilities of SETAs is to conduct quality assurance within their sectors. The main way in which they do this is through an accreditation model – that is, they accredit institutions which offer educational programmes within their sectors of the economy. This is done largely within a quality management framework, whereby institutions must prove to the SETA that they have good quality management systems. Sometimes the SETAs also look specifically at the programmes offered by the institutions; this is referred to as programme approval. Sometimes the SETAs evaluate a sample of assessments conducted by the institutions in order to check that assessments are all of the same standard.

A changing system?

As mentioned above, the organisations responsible for quality assurance of education in South Africa are currently changing. What you have just read describes the organisations which existed at the time this booklet was being written (late 2008). In the near future, some changes will be made. This section describes the likely composition of quality assurance organisations in the future.

Three Quality Councils (QCs) will be created, which will oversee all education programmes in South Africa. Two of these Quality Councils will be created by amending the legislation that has created Umalusi and the HEQC. In other words, the organisation that is now Umalusi will become the Quality Council for general and further education and training, and the organisation that is now the HEQC will become the Quality Council for

1. See *National Qualifications Framework*, by Richard Jewison (Issues in Education Policy 1), for more information about SETAs.

higher education. A new Quality Council – the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO) – will bring together in one single body the quality assurance role currently undertaken by the SETAs. However, the SETAs may continue to do quality assurance in their specific sectors, with the QCTO as an overarching organisation.

As discussed above, in certain professions, associations exist through legislation. These associations will continue to exist, and will work with the relevant Quality Council where necessary.

It is hoped that this new arrangement will streamline quality assurance in South Africa, and make it easier for educational institutions to work out which quality assurance body they should work with.

Debates about Quality Assurance in Education

We saw above that there are debates about the value of quality assurance generally. When it comes to quality assurance in education, there are even more debates. Some people question whether the new quality assurance models are appropriate for education. Others argue that even traditional methods of monitoring quality in education are problematic. A few of these debates are discussed briefly below. There are no easy answers in education, and the discussions below merely touch on some critiques. There is no space here to go into detail, or to provide detailed counter-arguments. Read the critiques, and decide for yourself whether or not you agree with them. Read more if you really want to understand the debates about quality assurance and quality in education; the Further Reading section at the end of this booklet will help you find places to start.

What is the product?

Many quality management systems originated in manufacture. As seen in the Introduction to this booklet, manufacturing companies wanted to move from what was called “quality control” systems (looking at a sample of finished products to check that there were not too many with defects) to “total quality management” systems (looking at the processes involved in manufacture, in order to eliminate problems before they happened). This emphasis on “process” instead of “product” enabled the idea of quality assurance to move beyond only manufacture.

Nevertheless, some people argue that quality management systems are still driven by the logic of manufacture, and still assume that there is a product which is being produced. This, they argue, makes it difficult to apply total quality management systems to education – it is not clear what in education could be considered a product, and whether there is any sense in thinking about education in terms of products and customers. Furthermore, some people argue that the parts of education systems which are the easiest to measure may not be the most important. For example, it is difficult to measure creativity, ingenuity, innovativeness, perseverance, and so on. Yet these are all characteristics which we hope our educational institutions can instil in students. This criticism is not only applied to new quality assurance models, but also to examination systems.

What about the audit conundrum?

In the section above on general debates about quality assurance, the audit conundrum discussed the problem of who should judge quality. It mentioned that in many instances, the best people to make judgements about quality are the experts in the field. For example, doctors are the best people to decide on the quality of a medical degree, because they understand better than anyone else what it is that a doctor needs to know. This idea is what has historically been the basis of the peer review system discussed above. Thus, some people argue that it is wrong for an outside organisation (like a quality assurance organisation) to attempt to make

judgements about the quality of educational programmes. The argument is that government or regulatory organisations (such as quality assurance organisations) are not able to make appropriate judgements because they are staffed by people who are not directly involved in the areas they are making judgements about.

In order to accommodate this critique, quality assurance organisations try to use experts wherever possible. For example, if the HEQC is evaluating a particular educational programme, it gets experts in that area to form part of its team of evaluators. When Umalusi evaluates the standard of exam question papers or of marking, it does so by commissioning subject experts. So, if historically experts have evaluated quality, why do we need a change? Some argue that experts have not always been accountable; getting them to operate within a more formalised framework, with specific criteria and procedures, is an improvement on old approaches. Others counter this by arguing that once peers are forced to behave like bureaucrats, they will make judgements as if they are bureaucrats, and not as if they are experts. A different argument about the use of expert judgements is that it is not always clear who the experts are. For example, it was argued above that doctors are the best people to decide on the quality of a medical programme. But are teachers the best people to decide on the quality of a teacher education programme, or should teacher education experts make that decision? Should teachers decide on the standard of exams for schools, or should experts at universities make those decisions? These are all questions which have no easy answers, and which make it complicated to decide who the best people are to make judgements about educational quality.

Fitness for purpose or fitness of purpose?

In the section above on “Debates about Quality Assurance”, the “lead parachute” was discussed – the idea that although all the specified processes are correctly followed the prescribed outcome may not be the correct one. In educational quality assurance debates, this is sometimes referred to as the difference between *fitness for purpose* – does this course appropriately

teach students according to its stated objectives – and fitness *of purpose* – are the stated objectives of the course the correct ones?

So, people who are concerned with educational quality need to make judgements about the quality of a curriculum, of a school, of an exam, of a university, and so on, in terms of whether they are achieving their objectives. This is not an easy thing to do, because educational programmes and educational institutions have many and complex objectives, which are often not measurable or are difficult to measure.

Even more difficult is deciding what the aims and objectives of education should be. At a common-sense level, this seems to be a simple matter. Yet, ask anyone what they think the aims of education are, and you will obtain a long list, which differs from person to person. Ask any expert, and the differences start to increase! There is no space here to go into the details of this debate; for now it is important to note that there is a debate, and that it makes the idea of quality assurance in education a very difficult enterprise.

How do we know that quality assurance improves quality?

Since quality assurance in education is relatively new, there is very little research into its effectiveness. Those in favour of quality assurance sometimes assume that it will improve quality because that is what it is designed to do. However, good intentions do not always lead to the desired objective, and sometimes good intentions have undesired consequences.

One of the criticisms of quality assurance systems is that they are complicated and costly for educational institutions to implement. For example, total quality management systems involve subscription costs (to the auditing body that manages the system), and often involve very time-consuming activities in order to comply with the audit criteria. Government organisations or other regulatory organisations that accredit educational institutions often want very specific information presented in a very specific way, and it can take a lot of time for educational institutions to

provide this. Similarly, educational institutions can find themselves forced to spend a huge amount of time and energy preparing for audits by quality assurance organisations.

If there is absolute proof that these different quality assurance systems will in fact adequately monitor and improve educational quality, then perhaps the time and expense is justifiable. However, there is often little evidence that this is the case. Some people argue that the time and money spent on quality assurance would be better spent directly targeting factors that affect quality in educational institutions – improving salaries of teachers and lecturers, improving libraries and facilities, and so on.

Conclusion

It is all very well to point out the problems of the various ways of monitoring educational quality. But in South Africa, as in many countries, education requires a huge portion of the national budget. A large proportion of taxpayers' money is spent on our educational institutions, and so the government must have mechanisms and systems for monitoring educational institutions and trying to improve them. Similarly, it can be argued that the government has an obligation to protect learners from being exploited by unscrupulous private educational institutions, and that therefore it needs systems to indicate which institutions are officially approved. It is also important that at exit points, such as the end of secondary education, there are proper checks and balances in the assessment systems used for learners, because these assessments will have consequences for the rest of their lives.

Education is complex, and there are no easy answers. South Africa has young organisations which are trying to find the best way of doing quality assurance. The fact that the organisational reality is changing shows that education policy reform in South Africa has not been without problems

and difficulties. Quality assurance organisations must always be very careful that they are not adding unnecessary bureaucratic burdens to the organisations they are monitoring, and that they can justify their requirements through some kind of evidence. They must also be alert to the various problems that can exist with different approaches to monitoring and improving educational quality, and should never assume that it is easy or straightforward to make educational judgements. Despite all these problems, however, they have to monitor and attempt to improve quality, even within imperfect systems; they have to make judgements about the quality of education. This means they must always be self-critical, and open to criticism from outside. It also means that they have to make unpopular decisions at times, such as deaccrediting institutions, if they believe that the public will be short-changed by the educational programmes offered by particular institutions.

To venture further into quality assurance, education policy, and quality in education, the reader is referred to the list of Further Reading at the end of the booklet. This list is by no means comprehensive – it provides a very small sample, and a few starting points, in different directions, for those interested in reading and learning more.

Further Reading

Research, debates and policy documents about quality assurance

Allais, S., M. King, L. Bowie and C. Marock. 2007. *The 'F' Word: The Quality of the 'Fundamental' Component of Qualifications in General and Further Education and Training*. Pretoria: Umalusi.

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South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). 2000. *The National Qualifications Framework and Quality Assurance*. Pretoria: SAQA.

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Vroeijenstijn, T. 2001. How to Assure Quality in Higher Education. In *Quality Assurance in Open and Distance Learning*, edited by N. Baijnath, S. Maimela and P. Singh. Johannesburg: UNISA and Technikon South Africa.

Young, M. and S. Allais. 2004. Approaches to Quality Assurance in the GET and FET Bands: Umalusi discussion document. Pretoria: Umalusi.

General reading about educational quality

Chisholm, L. 2004. The Quality of Primary Education in South Africa. New York: Unesco. Online. Available url: <http://portal.unesco.org/education>. Accessed 24 April 2007.

Moloi, M. and J. Strauss. 2005. *The SACMEQ II Project in South Africa: A Study of the Conditions of Schooling and the Quality of Education*. Harare and Pretoria: SACMEQ and South African Ministry of Education.

Moore, R. 2004. *Education and Society: Issues and Explorations in the Sociology of Education*. Cambridge: Polity.

Pennycuik, D. 1998. School Effectiveness in Developing Countries: A Summary of the Research Evidence. London: Overseas Development Administration, Education Division

Shalem, Y., S. Allais and C. Steinberg. 2004. Outcomes-based Quality Assurance: What Do We Have to Lose? *Journal of Education*, 34: 51-77.

Taylor, N. and P. Vinjevoold. 1999. *Getting Learning Right: Report of the President's Education Initiative*. Johannesburg: Joint Education Trust.

Winch, C. 1996. Special Issue: Quality and Education. *Journal of the Philosophy of Education*, 20(1).

Young, M. 2001. Educational Reform in South Africa (1990 – 2000): An International Perspective. In *Education in Retrospect: Policy and Implementation Since 1990*, edited by A. Kraak and M. Young. Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council.

Legislation and White Papers

Republic of South Africa (RSA). 1995. South African Qualifications Authority Act (Act No. 58 of 1995).

Republic of South Africa (RSA). 1996. South African Schools Act. (Act No. 84 of 1996).

Republic of South Africa (RSA). 1997a. Higher Education Act (Act No. 101 of 1997).

Republic of South Africa (RSA). 1997b. National Education Policy Act (Act 27 of 1997).

Republic of South Africa (RSA). 1998. Skills Development Act (Act No. 97 of 1998).

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Websites

www.cepd.org.za

www.che.ac.za

www.doe.gov.za

www.saqa.org.za

www.umalusi.org.za

Centre for Education Policy Development

Council on Higher Education

Department of Education

South African Qualifications Authority

Umalusi: Council for Quality Assurance in General and Further Education and Training

Titles in the *Issues in Education Policy Series*

- Number 1 *The National Qualifications Framework*, by Richard Jewison
Number 2 *School Governance*, by Tsakani Chaka
Number 3 *School Fees*, by John Pampallis
Number 4 *Education in Rural Areas*, by Michael Gardiner
Number 5 *Quality Assurance in Education*, by Stephanie Matseleng Allais

These titles are available in hard copy from the Centre for Education Policy Development, and in electronic format on the CEPD website (www.cepd.org.za).

Other titles on various education policy issues are in preparation, and will be published from time to time.

This is one of a series of booklets on key issues in education and training policy in South Africa. Each booklet deals with one such issue and aims to give the reader, in plain English, an informed overview of the topic and its implications for various stakeholders.

The intended readership includes a wide range of people with an interest in the education and training system – members of Parliament or of provincial legislatures, teachers, trade unionists, employers, student and community activists, education department officials, journalists, governors of educational institutions, members of local or provincial education and training councils, and interested members of the general public.

Issues in Education Policy, Number 5

Quality Assurance in Education

“Quality assurance” is a term that is new in education, but that has rapidly become very important. But what exactly is quality assurance? Why do we need it? Does it really improve quality? Is quality assurance in education something different from quality assurance in general?

This booklet is an introduction to quality assurance in education. It explains in ordinary English the various terms and systems related to quality assurance, and briefly describes the organisations in South Africa responsible for quality assurance in education. It also examines some of the debates and critiques of quality assurance in education, and looks at issues like external examinations, systemic evaluation, and school and teacher inspections. A list of readings is provided at the end of the booklet for those who want to learn more about quality assurance, related education policy, and broader discussions about quality in education.



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