PROCESS FOR AND CONDUCT OF PROGRAMME REVIEW: THE UNISA CASE STUDY

Rachel Prinsloo

1. INTRODUCTION

Oosthuizen (2005) outlines various steps that need to be included in the planning and execution of a programme review. Two sub-themes are suggested: the process framework for the review, and the design, methodology and instruments or tools to be used.

For the UNISA case study, this paper provides a six-dimensional analysis consisting of the following elements, for the reasons proffered below:

1. UNISA as the dedicated open and distance learning institution
2a. Responsiveness to external realities: The policy environment
2b. Responsiveness to external realities: Global challenges and quality issues for open and distance learning
3. Historical pre-merger context
4. Re-engineering the comprehensive
5. Programme reviews for planning and academic quality assurance at UNISA
6. UNISA structural arrangements and six key challenges.

The first reason is to locate the new dedicated and comprehensive open and distance learning institution in the evolving higher education landscape, and the second is to identify the unique and additional concerns to which it needs to respond. Third, given the immediate merger juncture, it is tactical to reflect on the historical pre-merger contexts which could further underpin strategies for re-engineering the comprehensive, especially with regard to the seminal work already undertaken on programme review outputs to inform planning and quality assurance arrangements.

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2. UNISA AS THE DEDICATED OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING INSTITUTION

The reformulated vision of the new UNISA culminated in the expression ‘Towards the African university in the service of humanity’, through an intense and telescoped institutional strategic planning exercise. The 2015 Agenda and Plan for Transformation represents an ongoing and serious reconsideration of strategy, as helpfully defined by Tomlinson (2003): ‘setting new directions and objectives that represent a significant discontinuity with the past or identifying major new developments in the core business.’

The context of this exercise built on the key features of comprehensive institutions, largely following the ideas of Baijnath (2003), stated as:

- ensuring diversity – mission and programme differentiation;
- responding to and meeting regional and national skills and knowledge needs;
- building new institutional identities and organisational forms; and
- transcending the fragmentation, inequalities and inefficiencies of the geopolitical imagination of apartheid.

He argues that the comprehensives make a creative contribution to the restructuring of higher education, introducing an innovative new organisational form. The experiment to integrate the full spectrum of occupational, academic, vocational, research and developmental programmes will for the first time coordinate and unify the education, training and development sectors – a long outstanding policy goal. Improved access and mobility will erode the legacy of apartheid. Furthermore, to take South African higher education into the 21st century’s knowledge-driven global environment, issues such as rationalisation, facilitating greater efficiencies, synergies in intellectual and resource capital, economies of scale and addressing financial sustainability more systematically and rigorously, deserve critical attention to enable a response to the pressing human resource development and information communication technology imperatives.

The main policy rationale for the new UNISA as the single dedicated distance education institution was to maintain and expand opportunities for students in Africa and rest of the world. The clear focus and strategy for the role and purpose of distance education included responsiveness to national and regional development goals, creating a national network of centres of innovation and a national network of learning centres to enhance student support. Using economies of scale and scope, eliminating costly duplication, harnessing ICT possibilities and pooling resources were cited as some of the main reasons, as were rationalisation of programmes and compatibility. With more than 200 000 students and 3000 courses, the new UNISA as a comprehensive was to reengineer its PQM (Programme and Qualifications Mix) into largely a university (70 per cent) and technikon (30 per cent).
mixed arrangement. The institution would offer multi-level undergraduate to postgraduate studies. The current reality is reflected in Figures 1 and 2.

**Figure 1: Composition of the student body by race in 2004**
Figure 2: Number of students in 2004

Mega-university

- **Number of students in 2004**

Unisa has had an annual ongoing growth in student numbers. The unduplicated headcount enrolment for 2004 was 215 825. The qualifications count for 2004 came to 222 992 and the course count to 981 762.

- **Composition of the student body in terms of university and technikon students in 2004**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INSTITUTIONAL TYPE</th>
<th>STUDENTS (Unduplicated headcount)</th>
<th>PERCENTAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University (Old Unica &amp; Vuder)</td>
<td>160 515</td>
<td>74.37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technikon (Old TSA)</td>
<td>55 310</td>
<td>25.63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>215 825</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.1 **Responsiveness to external realities: The policy environment**

Baijnath (2003) also reminds us that the new institutional types are the 11 universities, five universities of technology (from the former 16 technikons), six comprehensive institutions and two national institutes of higher education in provinces where no such institutions existed before.

Figure 3 shows the structural outcomes of the National Plan for Higher Education (DoE, 2001).
Summary of the National Working Group recommendations on institutional types

Given that UNISA is the national dedicated open and distance learning institution, its reinvention and transformation process needs to be aligned to that of cognate institutions such as the universities of technology to facilitate transfers into the occupational/vocational and professional developments curriculum tracks. Alignment to the traditional university sector with regard to general formative and postgraduate degrees and research and development is another imperative. This section draws largely on Baijnath (2003). It summarises the processes informing the NPHE and the consequent merger disruptions and describes the programmatic characterisations of the new types.

The Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU) in Port Elizabeth consists of the Port Elizabeth Technikon (PET) and the University of Port Elizabeth (UPE), incorporating Vista. The rationale given for this merger was geographic proximity, programme compatibility, undergraduate diploma and certificate focus. The aim was to increase regional diversity, explore rationalisation potential and create synergy through pooled research. The institutional type will be a comprehensive multi-campus and multi-level institution offering university- and technikon-type programmes with distinction at postgraduate level. Other features of the institution will be: 18 000 students with contact – 45 per cent undergraduate, 40 per cent bachelor’s degrees, 15 per cent postgraduate, 30 per cent science, engineering and technology, 30 per cent business management and 40 per cent education and humanities.
The University of Johannesburg consists of the former Rand Afrikaans University (RAU) and the Witwatersrand Technikon (WITSTECH), and incorporates Vista East Rand and the Soweto Campus. The rationale for this merger included the strengths accruing from pooling resources; the postgraduate strengths being complementary (humanities at RAU and science, engineering and technology at Wits); both institutions being strong in the field of business management; and issues of promoting student equity and staff synergies. Geographic proximity also featured in this configuration. This institutional type will culminate in a comprehensive university of technology with some 20 per cent distance education programmes, roughly half university and half technikon. The PQM will consist of a mix of diploma (47 per cent), undergraduate bachelor’s (35 per cent), and a postgraduate portfolio of 18 per cent.

The rationale for the transformation and reinvention arrangements for the University of Zululand (UNIZUL) were of a different order. Financial, enrolment, location, performance, and competition woes were cited as chief motivators. The institution is expected to give its mission a more contextualised regional focus for the Richards Bay area and have largely technikon type programmes with a limited number of relevant university programmes. As an institutional type it will become a comprehensive university of technology with few university type programmes and even fewer postgraduate ones. It has 6000 to 7000 students, with the majority in undergraduate diploma and professional bachelor’s programmes, and 70 per cent in science, engineering and technology, and business and commerce.

The University of Venda (UNIVEN), previously the University of the North and Medunsa, was also destined to become a comprehensive institution. The rationale that it would serve the interests of the region was cited. As an institutional type it would be a comprehensive, offering technikon type programmes and a range of relevant university type programmes. The current arrangement is undergraduate diplomas in a limited range, postgraduate diplomas and honours degrees.

Walter Sisulu University was created from the former University of Transkei, Border Technikon and the Eastern Cape Technikon, to form a comprehensive institutional type with multi-campuses, including a medical school.

The emerging typology of comprehensives then consists of half university and half technikon in various combinations:

- Contact and distance education, undergraduate and postgraduate programmes – UPE/PET and RAU/WITSTECH
Largely university and part technikon – UNIVEN and UNISA/TSA (Technikon South Africa) /VUDEC (Vista University Distance Education Campus)

Dedicated distance education institution with mix of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes – TSA, UNISA and VUDEC

Smaller rural university with largely technikon programmes and undergraduate focus – UNIZUL.

The Gibbon study commissioned by the Department of Education (DoE, 2004b), to inform the engineering of comprehensives, provides solid comparative analyses with strategically selected international contexts. Besides the very useful overview of programme models and curriculum forms, the following general traits were considered by the author to be key features for the new institutional type:

1) Responsiveness and relevance of the PQM and research foci to local, regional and national needs. For UNISA it is imperative to factor in the global dimension.

2) Enabling diversity through accommodating a full suite of programmes (vocational, career-focused, professional and general formative) reflecting both university and technikon type programmes and qualifications

3) Increased accessibility with different entry and exit levels. Student mobility and articulation – vertical, horizontal and diagonal – will also be facilitated.

4) Flexibility – collaboration and partnerships with community, and cooperative governance involving key stakeholders in civil society, government, business, organised labour, and industry partners.

Elsewhere, Baijnath (2003), in a position piece for the Council on Higher Education, exploring the interrelated notions of differentiation and diversity, introduces a set of diversity indices, considered to be highly relevant dimensions for generating ‘merged quality frameworks’:

1) Systemic diversity referring to type, size and fitness of purpose characterisation.

2) Structural diversity, premised upon differing legal and historical foundations, governance structures, institutional culture; delegations of authority.

3) Programmatic diversity – scope, levels, comprehensiveness, purposes, mission and emphases of programmes and mode of delivery, nature of technical and support services.

4) Procedural diversity – structural internal quality assurance (QA).

5) Reputational diversity – status and prestige differentials.
6) Constitutional diversity – students served, range of stakeholder constituencies.

**Constructive engagement as a repositioning strategy at UNISA**

Singh’s (2003) thoughtful and incisive analysis of embedding universities within a complex socio-political environment argues for a multi-layered process of constructive engagement with clear, principled terms of reference. A wide-ranging public information campaign and marketing strategy was undertaken by UNISA’s senior management, led by the principal, to engage with various stakeholders of the university, during the transitional merger phases. Furthermore, the Bureau for Marketing Research also undertook an intensive internal and external survey to ascertain perceptions of the new comprehensive, the nature of preferred programmes (for example, academic, vocational, and professional development), teaching and learning approaches and interactions, and the types of social and educational outputs expected.

In some measure, UNISA experimented with Singh’s (2003) notions of the terms of engagement, which imply strenuous, reflective and reflexive, argumentative interaction with the external sphere in at least four spheres:

- Setting goals, purposes, and priorities.
- Relating teaching and learning to the wider world.
- Dialogue between researchers and practitioners.
- Taking on wider responsibilities as neighbours and citizens in the public good.

This is clearly evident in the new vision statement, ‘Towards the African University in the service of humanity’, which for UNISA means the global public good, given its regional, African and international scope and reach. It is worth noting that, although distance education is dominated by UNISA, this mode of delivery is fast becoming a growing reality in residential universities. In 2001 approximately 11 per cent of students at predominantly face-to-face public higher education institutions were enrolled in distance education programmes at these institutions.

The policy advice document (CHE, 2004) also argues for an increased understanding of education and training provision as a continuum of delivery, with residential and face-to-face learning at one end of the spectrum and online learning at the other. Key considerations are when, for what purposes and in what ways open and distance learning is appropriate, and what the enabling conditions and structural and other constraints are.

Figures 4 and 5 show student enrolment patterns, in Africa and internationally. Academic collaboration and partnerships in learning centres and agencies is another complex and vast pattern of interrelationships. To date the new UNISA does not have an internationalisation
policy and will have to formulate an institutional response to the increasing imperatives coming from the codes of conduct for cross-border delivery.

Figure 4: UNISA students in Africa

![Unisa Students in Africa](image)

Figure 5: International students

![International Students](image)
2.2 Responsiveness to external realities: Global challenges and quality issues for open and distance learning

Higher education in the 21st century

Open and distance learning is an innovative response to the education environment reflected in the vision of the *World Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty-first Century: Vision and Action*, adopted by the World Conference on Higher Education convened by UNESCO in Paris on 9 October 1998. Briefly summarised, this UNESCO Declaration advocates the provision of opportunities for higher and lifelong learning, with an optimal range of choice and flexibility of entry and exit points within the system. Such access should provide the opportunity for individual development and social mobility in order to educate for citizenship and active participation in society, with a worldwide vision; for endogenous capacity-building; and for the consolidation of human rights, sustainable development, democracy and peace, in a context of justice.

Closer to home, and resonating with the sentiments expressed above, the National Plan for Higher Education (DoE, 2001) gives impetus to the policy framework and the goals, values and principles that underpinned the White Paper. The stated intentions are to develop a higher education system that will promote equity of access and fair chances of success for all who seek to realise their potential, while eradicating all forms of unfair discrimination and offering redress for past inequalities. National development needs are to be met through well-planned and coordinated teaching, learning and research programmes, including the high-skilled employment needs of a growing economy operating in a global environment. The social and transformation agenda is to support a democratic ethos and a culture of human rights and practices conducive to critical discourse and creative thinking, cultural tolerance, and a common commitment to a humane, non-racist and non-sexist social order. This is hardly a reformist agenda, since higher education institutions are explicitly expected to contribute to the advancement of all forms of knowledge and scholarship, and in particular to address the diverse problems and demands of the local, national, southern African and African contexts, and to uphold rigorous standards of academic quality (DoE, 1997:10-11).

Globalisation and GATS/ Development of regional qualifications (SADC RQF – South African Development Community Regional Qualifications Framework)

I have argued elsewhere that UNISA needs a sturdier defence of and position on education in the global public good (Prinsloo, 2005), and here I draw on that argument. With regard to the silences around the intention and eventual outcome of a Regional Qualifications / Quality Assurance Framework, that of *ensuring proactive global competitiveness on African terms*, various authors warn that national and regional policy can be undermined and undone by the marketisation and commodification of knowledge as contained in the World Trade Organisation General Agreement on Trade and Services (WTO – GATS).
Of the seven African countries which have responded positively and agreed to the provisions of GATS, the following data on the sectors that have been conceded has been provided: the DRC – higher education; the Gambia – primary, adult and other services; Ghana – secondary and other; Lesotho – all services in education; Mali – adult education; Rwanda – all education; and Sierra Leone – all education services. The category ‘other education services’ includes activities, such as testing, that are not classified in primary, secondary, higher education or adult education.

Another significant fact is that very recently five countries, the US, Norway, Kenya, New Zealand and Australia, repeatedly requested South Africa to open its education markets through GATS. The country was asked to remove the ‘burdensome requirements’ it had instituted to deal with ‘fly-by-night’ institutions in protecting the public good. A strongly worded statement from the minister of education at the time clarified South Africa’s position on GATS and uncritical trading in educational services. The minister was adamant that education is not a commodity to be sold or bought and should embrace the intellectual, cultural, political and social development of individuals, institutions and nations. The statement concluded by reaffirming that the ‘public good’ agenda should not be held hostage to the vagaries of the market. Singh (2003) provides a convincing account of the need for state intervention and protectionism especially for poor and developing countries to achieve their development aspirations in the global market.

The uneven levels of development with regard to setting up comparable NQFs (National Qualification Frameworks) will affect the completion of any regional or continental frameworks, and more alarming is the tendency for African states to have very insular and independent reactions to the GATS regimes. Such fragmentation and ‘divisiveness’ will have serious and debilitating consequences for building a coherent and consolidated African higher education system. Psychologically, the term ‘communities of liability’ might help to explain this phenomenon. Where citizens and nation states perceive their interests and development opportunities to be threatened by lack of adequate resources, opportunities for mobility and containment such as safety and food security, they will actively pursue other alliances and forms of identification. The challenge for both political and academic leadership is how to harness these tendencies and persuade citizens and states to reaffirm their Africanness and contribute to building ‘communities of trust’ instead.

3. THE HISTORICAL PRE-MERGER CONTEXT

This paper now moves from a macro to a meso account. As a precursor to the pending merger, and with foresight and vision, senior management at the former Technikon SÀ (now part of UNISA) eventually supported a scaled down version of the TSA/SAIDE (Technikon South Africa, South African Institute for Distance Education) Courseware Evaluation and Capacity Building Project (August 2000 – August 2002). The project brief was to develop a rigorous, cost effective and quality assured programme review process, with outputs that could address a radical overhaul of the curriculum and contribute significantly to the institutional transformation processes that was under way.
With hindsight now, the participatory and action research oriented approach and intervention methodology used at the time is possibly best described according to the perspective underlying the principles of ‘fourth generation evaluation’ (SRDS, undated). In this approach, evaluation is defined as a process whereby evaluators and stakeholders jointly and collaboratively create a consensual valuing construction of the object under investigation. Also relevant for our purposes is the explicit recognition of this as a socio-political process that seeks to include social, cultural and political aspects as central and integral to the process, as important as technical adequacy and rigorous research.

The intervention is a teaching and learning enhancement process based on peer evaluation, as described by Lomas and Nicholls (2005). The process was deliberately designed to facilitate reflections and reflexivity on a number of levels – an absolute requirement for any meaningful reconstruction of the insider’s point of view. The project was also managed as a continuous, recursive, and divergent process, with the management structures and moments of review and re-planning creating shared social constructions and subjecting the emerging positions to reconstruction. The intervention was planned as a phased and emergent process that cannot be fully designed at the outset, since its direction depends on inputs from stakeholders. The staged activities are serially contingent and support a process for sharing accountability rather than assigning it. Finally the process involves evaluators and stakeholders in a hermeneutic dialectic relationship, considered most efficacious for creating seminal expertise and building critical mass.

A variation on ‘train-the-trainer’

Apart from producing critical quality planning data at the programme level, the project was also charged with building staff capacity to undertake systematic reviews across the various faculties. As expressed by SERDS (2005), evaluators needed to play many conventional and unconventional roles in carrying out the various tasks involved in the four key activities of 1) mapping, (2) first level evaluation (FLE), (3) in-depth evaluation (IDE), and 4) the materials redevelopment component. These actions included gathering sources of evidence, working across the many technical and management sectors within a specialised distance education provider, report writing through many drafts, participation in planning and review sessions, and reporting at multiple faculty and senate levels. It is hardly surprising that evaluators need to possess not only a range of technical and research expertise but also relevant interpersonal qualities such as patience, humility, openness and adaptability.

Review design and methodology – See Appendix, Section 2.
Project outputs

The project produced 65 FLE reports, from a stratified sample that ensured representation of academic structures and CESM (Classification of Educational Subject Matter) categories, courses with high enrolments, small strategic courses, programme diversity – work integrated learning and practical components – and those nominated as growth nodes. In our experience, an in-depth evaluation (IDE) or full stakeholder analysis requires seven days to complete, based upon interviews with stakeholders (two days), observations (two days), assessment feedback (one day) and producing a consolidated report (two days). Planning the IDE Research Process is intensive and, in our case, involved clarifying the nature and purpose of the IDE exercise (within resource constraints agreed with the steering committee), establishing an IDE protocol, formulating an IDE action plan and continually piloting and revising the IDE instruments.

The underlying principles, pilot tools and instruments are described below. Figure 6 illustrates the process, based on the assumptions that the programme or qualification purposes need to demonstrate a clear link to the strategic goals and objectives captured in the institution’s vision, mission statement and supporting plans – fitness for purpose, as it were – and that the extent to which a statement of ‘graduateness’ is crafted will provide a sound touchstone of the inherent overall quality. The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA, 2001: 21) formulation neatly encapsulates all the academic quality dimensions: students must demonstrate that they understand what they are doing, and why (‘foundational competence’); that they can perform a set of tasks in an authentic context (‘practical competence’); and that they can integrate their performance with their understanding, so that they can adapt to changed circumstances and explain the reasons behind their actions (‘reflexive competence’). Statements of ‘graduateness’ that aptly describe such ‘applied competence’ as the ultimate outcomes indicate deep planning, rigorous design and continuous improvements.

Figure 6: Diagrammatic representation of the research process
Insights and lessons from the TSA / SAIDE programme review project

As a pre-merger strategy to consolidate vocational programmes, and internally quality assure and produce guidelines for programme redesign and redevelopment, the investment in this project has certainly borne fruits. A case study from the project had been selected and published in the recent NADEOSA text sharing innovative best practices according to the distance education quality criteria. Practitioners also presented their work at conferences locally and internationally. More significantly, a recent programme accreditation for a new Masters of Technology in Agriculture bears testimony to this groundbreaking work. The Appendix below provides an example of a ‘clustered programme’ feedback report to faculty.

The pilot instruments and tools were tactically aligned to the national distance education quality criteria, improved teaching and learning protocols and analyses on implementing integrated assessment strategies. This last was a special attempt to improve student progression and eventual throughput, an area of dismal performance for the sector as a whole, but especially for distance education.

Insights and lessons from the TSA faculty audit and programme review project

The production of the First Level Programme Evaluation Instrument (FLPEI) was based on prior TSA/SAIDE evaluation and capacity building study and recommendations. Given the developmental objective of improving quality, the instrument now requires further refinements and contextualisation for the new comprehensive. The generic principles, approach and design features ought to be able to withstand scrutiny even in this regard. The processes brought home the historical context of institutional inequities and discrimination reported by others. For a long time the former technikon sector was systematically excluded from accessing funding for research and development, so it is to be expected that, in comparison to the former university sector, there will be unevenness in knowledge production and strong postgraduate programmes.

The FLPEI was instrumental in facilitating the expertise and skills required to undertake evaluations that led to critical and evaluative self-assessment reports and re-curriculation plans. The scoring strategy enabled dialogue between the academics and the ‘expert’ team to arrive at a consensus on what constituted exemplary quality.

The enriched process which harnessed academic expertise with educational design and learning development through a team approach had both intended and unintended consequences. Evaluators were actively headhunted by external international agencies as well as other institutions. Improved teaching and learning; integrated assessment enhancing applied competence; curriculum benchmarking, research based development and a future trajectory that considered diversifying the funding base, the critical location and alignment of academic programmes and the insertion of research themes, were intended consequences. In another faculty, a research project on human rights and redistributive
justice, for instance, did not have any organic relationship to the teaching or postgraduate supervision functions.

4. RE-ENGINEERING THE COMPREHENSIVE

Invoking the earlier discussion on the key features and characteristics of the new comprehensives, the new UNISA’s strategy was to embark on structural reengineering to create five new colleges. The academic planning, quality and reporting arrangements now consist of emerging College Tuition Committees and Boards, and the Senate Academic Planning and Quality Assurance Committee that reports to the Senate Tuition Committee. SENEX/Senate are also routes for pressing matters, and the council finally scrutinises and ratifies proposals.

5. PROGRAMME REVIEWS FOR PLANNING AND ACADEMIC QUALITY ASSURANCE AT UNISA

It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a detailed account of the innovations and activities at the new UNISA. An academic audit, supported by a template and guidelines, attempted to provide continuity from the merger task team on academic programmes and structures. This was buttressed by a project, pre-empting the finalisation of the Higher Education Qualifications Framework (HEQF – DoE, 2004c), entitled Ways of seeing the UNISA Qualifications Framework (UQF). Using the draft HEQF as an organising tool, a series of position papers and workshops attempted to grapple with the policy, programme and curriculum design parameters it suggests. The exercise served to propel the institution into the future, as this was foreign to all, promoted conceptual and tactical thinking and deepened issues of academic planning. Invoking a HEQF PQM planning and refinement exercise further facilitated dialogues about curricular differentiation and consolidation, programme redesign and streamlining efficiencies. A principled decision has been taken to broaden planning and dialogical platforms through stakeholder consultation and to ensure that the UQF is eventually aligned to those of the universities of technology, regional meta-frameworks (SADC RQF), DEASA, pan-African (ACDE) and international frameworks.

6. UNISA STRUCTURAL ARRANGEMENTS AND SIX KEY CHALLENGES

The fluid policy environment, especially the protracted finalisation of the HEQF (DoE, 2004a), is noted as a grave concern, given that UNISA needs at least a two-year lead-in planning, courseware design, production and delivery time frame. Apart from the merger disruptions, this delay is expected to have further negative knock-on effects.
The **consolidated management information platforms** are only now available, but there is still a need for disaggregated programme level planning data. Certain systems reconfigurations – curriculum directory, student tracking and monitoring systems, for example – are also expected as a result of the emerging UNISA qualifications and credit accumulation and transfer policies.

**Staff reorientation and development** is an area that has not been consciously addressed to date. Assumptions about the levels of technical expertise with regard to educational design and learning development and their impact on deepening planning and improving teaching and learning and assessment strategies warrants another look.

**Complexity and scale of operations:** A UNESCO (2002) study appears to suggest that a considerable amount of research and analysis still needs to inform the costing of open and distance education provisioning. Economies of scale accrue benefits but at a certain point they become more costly to sustain, given the enhanced infrastructure and additional decentralised staff required to maintain the scale of operations. More importantly, the changing student profile will also have a significant impact on financial projections. The cost:efficiency ratio for delivering to poor and rural communities increases costs proportionately and needs to be factored into the equation.

**Two unresolved tensions:** Apart from the lengthy disruptions caused by the mergers, especially the almost intractable negotiating processes of reappointments and conditions of service, managing a catalytic transformation project will lead to further dislocations. Uncritically opting for continuity as an alternative might lead to the entrenchment of traditional mindsets and behaviours that do not promote the creation of a new and viable institution in the long run.

**Whether to opt for an incremental or a radical overhaul approach** is another dilemma. Slow and cautious processes will leave the higher education sector lagging behind and unable to compete in the global arena on its own terms. Considered and well planned radical overhauls might be just the catalyst for true innovation and sustainable consolidation. The Department of Education will have to step up its monitoring and advisory role to ensure that the mergers do eventually deliver on grand expectations, frame the deadlines and introduce more nuanced and proactive national performance indicators, rather than merely managing enrolment figures retrospectively.

**REFERENCES**


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Appendix: Example of a ‘Clustered Programme’ feedback session to college executive board

Academic Quality Assurance Project, UNISA Florida Campus

First-level programme review for the College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences: Emerging findings from the First Level Programme Review (FLPEI) process towards the college academic audit and strategic plan, 12 May 2004

1. Introduction and purpose of session

Given that we have completed the review processes for Animal Health, Nature Conservation and Agriculture, with the report on Horticulture pending, we would welcome an opportunity to present the emerging trends. We have clustered the outcomes and trends to provide an emerging college level analysis.

We have also identified a need to align our work to the substantive planning at college level to ensure meaningful integration and to receive direction with regard to the way forward.

2. Review design and methodology

The review design and methodology, aligned to the Council on Higher Education/Higher Education Quality Committee (CHE/HEQC), the Department of Education (DoE) and the National Association of Distance Education and Open Learning in South Africa (NADEOSA) distance education quality frameworks for planning, academic quality assurance and review parameters consisted of the following phases and actions:

1) FLPEI briefing and orientation sessions.

2) Support for completion of the FLPEI – finding evidence and data for the mapping exercise proved challenging.

3) Ensuring the accuracy and reliability for submission of all supporting evidence.

4) Preparing the draft report.

5) Undertaking follow-up interviews with academics and programme co-coordinators.

6) Drafting a first report and submitting it to the project leader and team members for comment.

7) Consolidating the draft report.
8) Setting up feedback sessions with the relevant colleagues.

9) Clarifying the role of the technical team in helping academics undertake a critical self-evaluation exercise and prepare for regular self-assessment reporting.

10) Signing off on the recommendations.

11) Revising the draft and incorporating inputs from the sessions.

12) Dissemination and reporting – distributing the final report to the programme group, the faculty executive boards, and the learning development/ instructional design team, responsible for the re-curriculation process.

3. Report on emerging trends and outcomes

3.1 General strengths of existing programmes

The programmes reviewed to date, Animal Health, Nature Conservation and Agriculture, have the following strengths:

- Purposes that clearly serve national and economic needs.

- Cooperation with industry practitioners in making decisions on the content of the programme, learning and teaching, and assessment.

- Learning programmes that involve not only discipline-related skills but also some generic skills such as communication, professional development and information technology (IT).

- Well-established experiential learning components with some involvement of individual mentoring. The learning involved in these components integrates discipline-related and generic skills, and integrated assessment is conducted to some extent in these components.

- Student support systems, sound use of the practical sessions as capstone assessment exercises, tutoring support and additional contact tuition / practical sessions.

- Fair graduation rates compared to other programmes and against national targets. The Department of Education aims to increase the participation rate of the 20–24 year cohort in higher education to 20 per cent within the next ten to 15 years (DoE, 2001: 2.2). In addition, an increase in the participation of adult and working students is encouraged. Furthermore, if South Africa is to produce sufficient numbers of graduates with the skills required by a modern economy, the number of postgraduate enrolments will also need to increase. Generally, although the number of students in the system from underrepresented groups has increased since 1990,
there has not been a significant increase in the retention and graduation rates of historically underrepresented groups, especially at postgraduate level.

- Progress in the planned implementation of an integrated quality system.

3.2 Key quality indicators and areas of improvement for the academic planning process and management system

- The college-level vision, mission and strategic goals for the programme groups should be reviewed/renewed and should clearly describe how they are aligned to the vision, mission and strategic goals of the new comprehensive institution and to national imperatives. The programme typology, as outlined in the New Academic Policy, should also be circumscribed more strategically.

- Action plans for achieving the strategic objectives stated in the annual business plan should be developed, monitored, recorded and reviewed, and this process should be fed back into future planning, completing the academic quality assurance cycle.

- There should be systematic and sustained involvement of all stakeholders (including students and alumni) in deciding on the purpose, nature and content of programmes in the college. It should also be investigated whether it might be possible to broaden the range of stakeholders and partners with a view to securing long-term funding, cooperative educational arrangements and research collaboration.

- The proposed quality system should be implemented and the system itself should be regularly reviewed for improvements. (Implementing the quality system should also ensure that the points below are addressed.)

- Financial planning and management information system (MIS) data should take account of and record all the variables involved in designing, developing, offering and quality assuring the programmes in the college. Resource allocation should be based on this planning. Financial reporting and other documentation such as regular balance sheets and budget projections should be maintained to show the overall financial position of the college, and provide disaggregated data at the programme level.

- In some of the programmes, lack of staff seems to be one of the most critical areas. Additional staff could not only improve the tuition but also help secure a broader base of students and additional partners (e.g. for funding purposes).

- The progression of students in the cohort as a whole and the rate of completion of subjects should be monitored. The attempt to address attrition rates should be pursued and receive more attention if possible. Targets should be set for graduation
rates and retention rates and progress toward the targets should be monitored. Similarly, student and staff equity targets should be set and monitored.

- As part of the quality management system, effective internal management information systems should be maintained. Formal feedback from all stakeholders should be regularly obtained, and reviews leading to continuous improvements should be undertaken.

- We strongly recommend that the institutional management information system should be upgraded to provide analysed data relating to graduation and retention rates per year group, the achievement of equity targets and so on.

### 3.3 Key quality indicators and areas of improvement for programme redesign and redevelopment

- The purpose and rationale for the programmes should be well aligned to the vision, mission and strategic goals of the new comprehensive institution and the re-engineered college.

- The information in the documentation describing the programme – the internal template for learning programme approval and SAQA registration documents – should be amended and revised to meet the necessary HEQC, SAQA and other requirements.

- In the documentation that describes the purpose, vision and mission of the programmes, a historical account – a developmental trajectory – of the initial rationale for the programme’s introduction and development could be included to make the rationale for the programme more convincing. Any planned or unintended deviations should be explained. It should be ensured that the purpose statement will be persuasive enough for the programme to be included in the new institution’s PQM in 2006.

- The outcomes and assessment criteria of the programmes in the college, their structure, and the nature of their teaching and assessment should be benchmarked against similar programmes nationally and internationally, and unique Africanisation and contextualisation features delineated.

- A realistic estimate should be made of the notional hours of learning involved in the programmes, and this should be reflected in their credit value. It is critical to also integrate the hours assumed for experiential learning and workplace-based assessment.

- In some cases, the possibility of career pathing should be taken into account in structuring the programmes. It should be ensured that the programmes will assist the students in their professional development and lifelong learning.
• Where possible modules and/or subjects should be shared by the various programmes in the group. Opportunities for cooperating with counterparts at UNISA (Pretoria campus) to ensure efficiency should be explored.

• It should be ensured that all the components of the learning programmes (‘subjects’, ‘modules’ and ‘service subjects’) work together in an integrated way to enable the students to attain the overall outcome of the programme. The way the modules relate to each other and to the purpose of the programmes should be made clear to the students.

• The ‘tuition model’ used in the programme group – that is, its learning and teaching – should be aligned with NQF and OBE principles. The learning that takes place in the various components of the programme should equip the students with all the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that are necessary for their role as practitioners. In other words, the discipline-specific outcomes and the critical outcomes should be integrated in the learning experiences that the student undergoes in all the components of the programme, as well as in the assessment. In many cases this might imply revising the current learning materials for the programme.

• Experiential learning should be well integrated into the programmes and links between the theoretical modules and the EL components should be made explicit. The possibility of upgrading the quality of EL by, for example, workplace visits and further support to and feedback from mentors should be investigated.

• An assessment strategy consciously aligned to the integrated assessment strategy should be planned for every programme.

• In most cases academic development could be better integrated into the programmes. Foundation courses need to be considered to significantly widen participation in the science, engineering and technology domain, which has been declared a national imperative.

• It should be ensured that all the elements of the programmes’ subjects and modules (that is, for example, the learning materials, contact sessions and assessment tasks in every module) relate well to each other and together provide suitable learning and teaching experiences. The new learning materials for the subjects or modules should teach well and should be interactive.

In summary, the following eight areas can be flagged as the main areas that need attention:

1) A comprehensive quality system should be implemented and maintained.

2) Staff capacity should receive urgent attention.
3) A more comprehensive effort should be made to address student attrition rates and to increase student numbers, keeping equity targets in mind.

4) Given the size of the programmes, a strategy for widening participation should be immediately developed, if this has not already been addressed.

5) Management information systems within the college and at central level should be refined to allow tracking of students and calculation of pass rates and graduation rates, as well as the setting of targets.

6) Attention should be given to broadening the range of stakeholders and partners with a view to securing long-term funding, cooperative educational arrangements and research collaboration. The insights of stakeholders should also be used to ensure the academic viability of the programmes in the colleges with regard to including socially contextualised and Africanisation issues in the curriculum.

7) A mindshift should be made in terms of programme design, so that programmes are not seen simply as a collection of subjects but are designed and planned as holistic, integrated units of learning aimed at facilitating the attainment of one overarching purpose. Programme redesign should also be refined to meet all NQF requirements.

8) The redevelopment of learning materials in line with the above consideration should be undertaken as a matter of urgency.

4. The way forward

- Update on developments.
- Finalising the programme review process.
- Planning the college level analysis.