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Counteracting Stakeholder Scepticism Towards the Integration of Quality Assurance Activities at a University: A Habermasian and Action Research Approach

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Abstract   This article reflects on an action research project conducted at a University of Technology in South Africa in order to integrate institutional service functions and divisions as an integral part of the university's quality assurance system. The article discusses the utilisation of action research processes as a methodology to solve the problem of the integration of support functions in the quality assurance system of an institution of higher learning. It gives a critical reflection on the development process of a new system and proposes a conceptual model for the review of support services, which is underpinned by Habermas' concepts of negotiated collaborative assessment and communicative action.

Keywords   Negotiated collaborative assessment · Communicative action · Quality management system · Reviews

Introduction

According to the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC), universities in South Africa should seek to establish and sustain effective internal quality management systems that enhance quality and yield reliable information for internal quality-related planning, external audit and public reporting (Council on Higher Education 2004, p. 5). Although the criteria in this document are developed for institutional audits on national level, they can be utilised for an institution's own internal reviews. Many institutions of higher learning in South Africa developed their own criteria for institutional audits based on the above-mentioned HEQC criteria. These criteria are helpful to measure the effectiveness of a university's core business, *inter alia* teaching and learning, research, and community engagement and governance, but are not fit for the review of institutional support services.

   Usually, a university's institutional support structure consists of academic support units (professional academic support services, *inter alia* staff development functions and student

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support services), clinical support services (example student counselling services), and service functions (*inter alia* motor fleet, security, maintenance, and cleaning services). This article focuses on the integration of service functions into institutional quality assurance processes. In South Africa, higher education service functions are not always formally integrated into institutional cycles of continuous reviews. Therefore, many institutions have insufficient processes and procedures for reviews and suitable criteria (minimum standards) for the quality assurance of their service functions. The development of a quality assurance system and minimum standards for service functions at VUT should be regarded as a refinement process and a next level of development of the university's quality assurance system.

Institutions in South Africa are utilising mechanisms such as continuous assessment and measurement of output in order to ensure accountability. Sceptics may see measuring of performance as accountability elided with policing, or the reduction of professional relations to quantifiable and so-called 'inspectable templates', or as mechanisms that introduce a new form of neo-liberal governmentality. Sometimes the external regulation and pressures from national level are viewed as instruments of governmentality underpinned by a power theory (Barrow 1999, p. 31).

This study unveiled, during its initial phase and after several interviews conducted by the researcher with key stakeholders of the support functions at the Vaal University of Technology (VUT) in South Africa, that a relatively high level of suspicion and fear exists amongst support function staff members with regard to the rationale for the integration of the services functions into the existing institutional quality assurance processes. This scepticism is due partially to a lack of exposure to and therefore limited knowledge of reviews within an educational environment. Usually, universities in South Africa have a developmental approach towards quality assurance and do not implement reviews as institutional punitive measurements. The conducted interviews revealed that the majority of service function staff members regarded reviews as mere inspections, and not as opportunities to enhance quality.

Habermas's philosophical theory of communicative action (CA) and the notion of negotiated collaborative assessment (NCA) are outlined as underpinning theories. CA might be helpful in developing a conceptual framework for the integration of service divisions into an institutional quality assurance system, and for the development of criteria that are acceptable and suitable for all stakeholders. In this study, NCA is regarded as a mechanism that can be used during departmental collaborative reviews. Habermas views ideal action, a concept that will be discussed later in more detail, as either social or non-social action; the object of non-social action is nature, while the object of social action is the human being. The notion of mutual understanding is relevant to social-action (Habermas 1984). For the purpose of this study, the focus will be on social action, which can be either success-oriented strategic action or understanding-oriented CA. The utilisation of the CA theory in education is a familiar practice (Siljander 1989, p. 111–121). Habermas views the concept of CA as "that form of social interaction in which the plans of action of different actors are co-ordinated through an exchange of communicative acts, that is, through a use of language orientated towards reaching understanding" (Habermas 1981, p. 44). Kemmis (2006, p. 97) states: "It seemed to me that the aspirations of CA could be written into or alongside the practices of reflection and discussion which is characteristic of action research".

In this study, the researcher was seconded as a team member of VUTs Operational Task Team, which consists of the researcher as the institution's quality manager, service function workers and three supervisors. The aim of this team was to reflect on operational

issues, to identify deficiencies, to plan for remedial actions and to report on progress made. The team consisted of non-academic staff members, except the researcher who is an academic and quality manager of VUT. The service function workers are mainly responsible for the daily maintenance of the campus, cleaning services, garden services, services function administrative staff, and so forth. The researcher was seconded to facilitate with the participants the integration of the service functions operations into the institutional quality assurance system. The researcher's initial informal interviews with the supervisors and support function staff unveiled a general degree of fear and/or scepticism with regard to quality assurance activities in general. During an Operational Task Team meeting, the workers proposed a new approach towards quality assurance for support functions. After a short deliberation, the participants agreed on assigning the researcher to conduct a literature study that will inform the further development of the project, that is the development of a quality assurance system for the support functions.

This article reflects on action research that was conducted at VUT to develop a solution to the integration of support functions in the institutional quality assurance processes, which include the development of minimum standards for reviews. The article discusses the process that was followed in order to integrate the support function structures in the university's system, and the development of minimum review standards while counteracting the existing fears and scepticism of the staff. An action research process was followed, as action research "aims at developing solutions to practical problems, which then inform practice" (Ebersöhn et al. 2010, p. 124). The article proposes a framework for the development of criteria that are acceptable for both the agents, *inter alia* the assessors (an institution's quality management structure and external peer reviewers) and the assessee (division under review or evaluation).

Literature Study

As already mentioned in the introduction, the researcher was assigned by the Operational Task Team of the service function unit of VUT to conduct a literature review that will inform the methodology and underpinning theories of the study. The following is a short discussion of the concepts CA, NCA, action research, and Total Quality Management (TQM).

Communicative Action (CA)

Habermas belongs to the tradition of critical theory, which is a reminder of the hermeneutic school in German philosophy (Pieterse 1990, p. 237). During the literature review the principles of Habermas' CA theory was investigated as a concept that will assist the team in the development of a quality assurance system for academic support service divisions, which includes the development of criteria or standards against which to conduct reviews. Habermas (1984, p. 86) defines CA as

> the interaction of at least two subjects capable of speech and action who establish interpersonal relations (whether by verbal or by extra-verbal means). The actors seek to reach an understanding about the actual situation and their plans of action in order to coordinate their actions by way of agreement. The central concept of interpretation refers in the first instance to negotiating definitions of the situation which admit of consensus.

It is important to make a distinction between Habermas's notions of CA and strategic action. CA is contrasted with strategic action. The goal with strategic action is to "achieve success by overcoming another actor's position" (Kelly 2000, p. 226). In CA, the participants are honest with each other and have equal chances to promise or to refuse, to be accountable and to demand accountability. On the other hand, within strategic action, the actor treats other persons as natural objects by means of exploitation. This takes place when the actors openly or implicitly manipulate others as if they are objects, in order to reach their own goals or to attain their own success. As already mentioned, contrary to the concept strategic action is CA, which is underpinned by the above-mentioned notion of interpersonal communication for the sake of mutual understanding, *inter alia* understanding-oriented CA. Mutual understanding is achieved by means of dialogue (real communication between subjects) which leads to consensus and action. According to Habermas (1984, p. 133), the actors in CA—as opposed to strategic action—synchronise their plans of action with other participants. Human beings are in this communication setting freely and are allowed the opportunity to express and actualise their potential in this type of ideal non-authoritarian communication (Pieterse 1990, p. 237).

Habermas's theory on CA suggests that social coordination is effective through discourse. According to Habermas, any person who communicates under suitable conditions will be able to make truth claims as well as validity claims (or moral claims), which may be acceptable for the hearer based on rational argument (Kelly 2000, p. 225). It is, according to Habermas, imperative that if we want someone else to understand us, we establish a relationship with that person, which ensures that the validity of our statements is accepted; this is on par with his notion of an ideal speech situation. Habermas refers to an imaginative ideal speech situation as a situation in which consensus is reached through argumentative actions (Habermas 1984, p. 177).

Habermas (1984, p. 177–178) describes the conditions for the ideal speech situation as conditions in which all participants have equal rights. The participants can use communicative acts to initiate discourses, perpetuate them by means of asking and answering questions, making and replying to objections and giving arguments and justifications. According to Stahl (2004, p. 4331), Habermas's ideal speech situation refers to the following factors: (a) nobody can be excluded from the discourse, (b) everybody has the same chance to contribute, (c) the participants must mean what they say, and (d) the communication must be free of external as well as internal constraints. Therefore, the participants in the discourse should have equal opportunities to express their feelings, intentions, recommendations, to explain, and to challenge the validity of statements, etcetera. Finally, all participants should have equal chance to give orders, to permit, to forbid, to give and to receive promises. There should be reciprocity in behaviour expectations.

The team selected and mutually accepted Habermas' theory of NCA was as the underpinning theory and review method during service function reviews.

Negotiated Collaborative Assessment (NCA)

A familiar concept as an assessment mechanism in the educational environment is Habermas' concept of NCA. NCA is a form of assessment that refers to a one-to-one relationship between the person who conducts the assessment (or assessor, or the system), and the person being assessed (or the assessee). Brna et al. (1999, p. 1) defined the notion of NCA as follows:

(NCA) stresses the shared activity typically undertaken by a classroom teacher or university lecturer and the student being assessed, to produce an agreed assessment.

The benefits of NCA are a result of the involvement of both assessor and assessee that increased the validity and reliability of the outcome of the assessment. The assessee should have the opportunity for discussion with regard to the nature of the criteria used in the assessment, and receive detailed feedback on the assessment in order to improve. Therefore, this approach aligns to VUTs quality assurance developmental approach.

An action research approach was followed, underpinned by the principles of Habermas's CA theory. Action research fosters team participation and equitable and mutual relationships between researcher and participants.

Action Research

The strength of action research is that it is pragmatic, "developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes" (Reason and Bradbury 2001, p. 1). It also empowers its practitioners by means of engagement with research and in the development and implementation of strategies (Baum et al. 2006 p. 854). It is situation-based and context specific research that is conducted in order to solve problems that will lead to the enhancement of practice (Koshy et al. 2011). Action research focuses on change, transformation and emancipation of participants in the research process (Parkin 2009, p. 22).

Although it is useful to follow a model for action research, the reliance on a specific model that is too rigid may not fit any enquiry. Excessive reliance on a model may affect flexibility adversely, which is characteristic of action research (Koshy et al. 2011). Action research can be viewed as a spiral of self-contained cycles of planning, acting, and fact finding about the results of the action (Lewin 1948, p. 206). Koshy et al. (2011) and Zuber-Skerrit (1993) describe action research as selecting a focus, collect data, analyse and interpret data and finally, take action, which includes the spiral elements of action research such as plan, act, observe and reflect, followed by re-planning and so on.

The researcher in action research is someone who first seeks out a real-world problem situation that is relevant to his or her research interest, and then declares the framework of ideas (philosophy, theories, etcetera) and methodology that he/she will use in the project (Jackson 2003, p. 183–184). The researcher "takes part in action in the situation and reflects on what happens using the framework of ideas and methodology" (Jackson 2003, p. 183–184). According to Reason (2005, p. 18) "it is only possible to do research with persons, including them both in the questioning and the sensemaking that informs the research, and in the action which is the focus of the research".

This study was conducted to create space in which participants were actively involved in cyclical processes of action and critical reflection. Reason and McArdle (2008, p. 125) state with regard to action research that it aims to contribute both to more effective work practices, and better understanding of the processes of organisational change. Relevant to this study is the concept co-operative inquiry. Heron and Reason (2006, p. 144) view co-operative inquiry as a way of working with other people, who have concerns and interests similar to yours in order to understand your world, develop new ways of looking at things, and learn how to act to change things you may want to change, and to find out how to do things better. They state that "ordinary people are capable of developing their own ideas and can work together in a co-operative inquiry group to see if these ideas make sense of their world and work in practice" (Heron and Reason 2006, p. 144).

Participation is a concept central to action research. The participants, who constituted the Operation Task Team, consisted of representative workers, three supervisors, and a quality manager as the co-researcher. This combination of participants from different backgrounds and organisational positions raises questions on the fields of power that might exist within the team. Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen's (2013) study ask, with regard to power questions, if it is possible (specifically in critical utopian action research or CUAR) for an action researcher to enter into dialogue with participants whom they understand as alienated, and where the researcher can be viewed as an *upper* and the participants are *lowers*. They ask a relevant question, "can one become a participant in a process presented as a managerial mafia offer which employees cannot decline?" (Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen 2013, p. 5). Therefore, it was a challenge to create the same relationship between all participants as co-researchers, especially where the researcher was viewed as an academic with certain research skills and background, and the rest of the participants as non-academics and workers with no post-secondary education. This assignment of the team to the researcher to conduct the initial literature review was a team decision based on the team's assumption that the researcher had the necessary skills and experience to conduct a literature review and to give feedback to the team for critical reflection. In retrospect, the team decision might have obstructed the opportunities of the participants during the research process to develop as co-researchers, and to experience what Parkin (2009, p. 22) refers to as participant transformation and emancipation.

Total Quality Management (TQM)

As already mentioned, VUTs quality management system is based on the principles of TQM. A TQM system, as in the case of VUT, generates quantitative and qualitative management information that feeds on an ongoing basis into planning and resource allocation processes on the institution's strategic, tactical and operational levels, based on Deming's plan-do-check-act (PDCA) model for continuous improvement (Evans and Lindsay 2002, p. 587). Central to a TQM system is the notion of customer satisfaction. Therefore, TQM can be regarded as a customer-centred quality management system. Many institutions of higher learning in South Africa adopt and adapt the principles of TQM in the development of their quality management systems within the new political dispensation (Brits 2010, p. 128). VUT adopted the PDCA model and adapted it to the plan-resource allocation-implementation-review-improvement (PraIRI) model (Brits 2010). There are institutions of higher learning that developed their quality management models based on variations to the TQM approach. These institutions follow the TQM based excellence models, such as the European Foundation of Quality Management (EFQM), South African Excellence Model (SAEM) and the Malcolm Baldridge National Quality Award (MBNQA) models. In his research, Anyamele (2005 p. 357) refers to institutions in Finland that implemented the EFQM excellence model with great success. The implementation of the TQM model has a mixed reaction amongst educators and institutions. There are institutions that find it quite easy to adopt and adapt quality models (Genis 2002, p. 67) that stem from industry, but there are also those institutions that have legitimate reasons why they are very sceptical about its implementation within the educational environment. One of the valid questions is what the effect of standardisation will have on the creative aspects of teaching and learning (Zuckerman 2000, p. 12). There are also critics who emphasise a perceived high failure rate of implementing TQM in educational institutions and therefore emphasising the importance of a critical evaluation of TQM as a management philosophy

within the educational context. According to De Bruyn (2002, p. 235), TQM should rather be regarded as a quality enhancement philosophy than a management strategy.

Many institutions in South Africa successfully implemented centralised-decentralised quality assurance systems that are underpinned by the principles and philosophy of TQM (Brits 2005 p. 1034–1035). The fact that quality assurance (industrial) models and systems have compatible generic principles makes it easy for universities to use these principles to develop quality assurance systems that are regarded as fit for purpose. The research of Motwani and Kumar (1997, p. 134) refer to institutions of higher learning that introduced TQM with tremendous success. These institutions experience enhancement with regard to institutional communication, employee morale, productivity and process efficiency. Therefore, despite the views of critics, it is not an unfamiliar practice for universities in South Africa to apply quality management models, concepts and techniques based on the TQM approach (Meirovich and Romar 2006, p. 325; Saunders and Walker 1991; Anyamele 2005, p. 361).

Overview of the Study

At VUT, the service function staff members had no system in place to measure the satisfaction of their clients (staff and students of the institution). The only source of management information that the service function units received was in the form of institutional satisfaction survey reports. Institutional staff and student satisfaction surveys are conducted on a 3 years cycle at VUT. This survey measured, from a TQM perspective, the satisfaction level of the institution's clients with regard to the environment, but focused more on issues related to the core business of the university; teaching, learning and research. A survey report was distributed to the relevant stakeholders of the institution, including the institution's service function units, with an expectation that the identified deficiencies will feed into remedial action plans and processes.

As already mentioned in the introduction, an Operational Task Team was established with representative workers and three supervisors of the institution's service functions. The team seconded the researcher, who is also the institution's quality manager, to assist them in dealing with the outcome of the survey. After a team perusal and discussion of the outcome of the above-mentioned satisfaction survey report, consensus was reached on the gap in the service function management system. The team agreed that there was a need for a mechanism that could generate management information on an ongoing basis, that focuses on service functions, and that would feed into their operational planning. The team assigned the researcher to conduct the above-mentioned literature study and to give feedback on possible theories and mechanisms to develop a quality assurance system for the service functions. This decision was based on the expertise of the researcher as an academic.

The researcher presented the outcome of the literature study to the team, followed by a discussion on Habermas' CA and NCA theories. The Operational Task Team agreed on using Habermas' CA theory as one of the guiding principles of the study. Characteristic of the CA approach is the principle of consensus with regard to plans, coordination of actions by means of agreement, equality of every participant, the importance of mutual understanding and non-authoritarian communication in which nobody is excluded and everybody has a chance to contribute. The team decided to conduct an action research study as the most suitable method to ensure maximum participant co-operation to address a common goal through processes of reflection and action.

Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen (2013, p. 17) is clear on the fact that power mechanisms will always be active between action researchers and partners, their research results indicate also that one cannot "eliminate organizational power relations or power mechanisms in the cooperation between researchers, managers, and employees" (Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen 2013, p. 6). These statements are relevant to the study due to the different backgrounds of the participants as researcher, supervisors and workers. Therefore, during the first meeting it was imperative to discuss how the participants relate to each other and what the guiding principles, during team interactions, will be. The concept *participation* is defined in this study as participation based on differences, as all participants are from different structures of the institution, with different academic backgrounds, and they had different roles and responsibilities in their operational frameworks. The team reached consensus on using the concept *participants* in order to avoid any implied hierarchy during the study. The team agreed on the importance of stakeholder interaction and opportunities to express feelings, to reach a point of mutual understanding and consensus.

Reconnaissance Phase of the Study: One–One Interviews

According to Wicks and Reason (2009, p. 244), we should have the ability to establish relations or some access to the communities we are concerned about prior to an action research study. Kemmis (2006, p. 100) states that the first step in action research is the formation of communicative space, and regards communicative space as issues or problems that are open for discussion, and of interaction between participants that foster the expression of diverse views. It is only then that people achieve mutual understanding and consensus. Given the diverse background of the participants and the above-mentioned possibility of power relations in the team (Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen 2013, p. 2), as well as the fact that the researcher and participants were not familiar with each other, it was imperative to establish interpersonal relations amongst the participants and researcher first. The service function staff has worked together for a long period, so there was therefore a collegial relationship that existed between them. The one-on-one non-structured interviews focused on the participants' roles in the service function division, as well as their previous experiences (prior to their appointment at VUT) of quality assurance activities. Non-structured interviews were used as they have a more informal approach.

The researcher was the primary data-gathering instrument in the one-on-one interviews. The interviews were necessary as the researcher was not familiar with the operational framework and roles of the university's service functions due to the fact that the institutional quality assurance system focused primarily on academic programme reviews, as well as national institutional reviews. The participants were also not familiar with the institutional quality assurance system and processes.

Ten interviews were conducted in order to understand the experiences of the participants, to understand the institutional service function environment and to foster mutual good relationship with the study's co-participants. These interviews should be regarded as the reconnaissance phase of the study. The notion of non-authoritarian communication underpinned these interviews. By using this theory in the interviews, a sound relationship developed between the researcher and the staff members; sharing stories set mutual understanding of experiences in motion. Both researcher and interviewees for better understanding of the participants' life worlds and for clarification of uncertainties asked questions. A participant explained how he lost his trust in quality evaluations with an experience he had as a worker at a company long before his appointment at VUT. According to this participant, the managers used the outcome of evaluations to "break me

down and to withheld my promotion in the long term". The researcher had the opportunity during the interview to explain the continuous improvement processes and the development approach of VUT with the interviewer.

During a team report-back session, the participants had the opportunity to reflect on the outcome of the interviews. The majority of participants state that they experienced the interviews as an opportunity that they had to gain knowledge with regard to the institution's systems and processes. There were also participants who still questioned the impact of quality assurance processes. A participant phrased his view of quality assurance activities as mere time-consuming paper work.

Stakeholder Workshops

According to Strydom (2007, p. 419), "workshops takes place after some of the preliminary research has been completed and a framework has been devised that now requires refining". Several workshops were conducted with the Operational Task Team members in order to reflect on the outcome of the interviews and the development of a quality assurance system and mechanisms that are fit for the purpose and acceptable for all. A process of understanding-oriented CA was an underpinning qualification during these workshops. This approach conveyed trust, ensured buy-in and created ownership of the system. It was also useful in counteracting the existing scepticism of some of the participants with regard to quality assurance activities that have a developmental approach, based on self-critical reviews.

The team reflected on the traces of existing scepticism amongst some of the participants with reference to the above-mentioned one-on-one interviewee statements. They reached consensus with regard to the utilisation of concepts such as reviews and assessment rather than evaluations. The concept self-evaluation will be replaced with self-assessment. Reviews will be an umbrella term for both self-assessment exercises as well as external peer review exercises. The concept evaluations, within the context of quality assurance activities, remind the participants of the industrial approach of quality assurance as inspections and punitive measures. The team reflected on the notion of reviews as mechanisms to enhance the quality of institutional service delivery. Brain storming exercises were held in order to discuss the issues such as possible review methods and the development of new, or the adoption of generic, standards for institutional service functions. Discussions were held on possible cycles of self-assessment and peer reviews, remedial action and planning processes, and the dissemination of information after reviews.

The notion of continuous improvement was discussed during a follow-up workshop. A decision was made during the workshops that the support functions would follow the same cyclical quality assurance processes of the rest of the institution, which is a process of self-critical assessment followed by validation exercises in the form of external peer reviews. The assessment method will be different; a new approach that to be implemented is the utilisation of NCA as a review mechanism. After reviews, the quality office will discuss the outcome of the self-assessment and external peer reviews exercise with the respective departments based on the principles of Habermas's NCA, that is that the quality manager would conduct a shared activity with the members of the departments under review in order to reach an agreed outcome of the assessment. The outcome, based on mutual agreement, will feed into remedial action planning and resource allocation processes and monitoring of the implementation of the plans based on the PIRI model.

The participants were not in favour with a fixed set of minimum standards. During a workshop, broad minimum standards were formulated based on criteria available from external quality assurance bodies on national and international level, generic standards from the excellence models, as well as new unique standards that are relevant for the review of service functions. The team reached a mutual agreement on issues such as the identification of review focus areas. Services function units under review will negotiate prior to reviews on the focus areas for reviews and the suitable criteria based on the principle of mutual agreement between the quality office and the respective unit. It is the prerogative of the unit or department under review to focus during reviews only on self-identified problem and risk areas. The standards, processes and procedures for reviews that were developed during the study offered a systematic measurement and quality assurance system for the institution's support functions. The above-mentioned workshops offered the participants an opportunity to be engaged creatively in the development process through dialogue and knowledge sharing, which counteracted to a great extent the existing fears and scepticism amongst the staff members.

The following is an example, relevant to the examination division, of a question used to develop criteria for ensuring the integrity of certification based on a CA approach:

Question: What are the arrangements that should be in place in order to ensure the integrity of certification at our institution, *inter alia* the appropriate quality assurance processes as well as effective security measures to avoid fraud and illegal issuing of certificates?

Based on the notion of an ideal speech situation, the participants had the opportunity in the workshop to reflect on the arrangements that will ensure the integrity of certification at an institution of higher learning, followed by a critical discussion and suggestions from the QPU, based on a process of group consensus. The review criteria were formulated based upon understanding and consensus.

The CA approach that was followed is on a par with the features of action research as a "set of practices that respond to people's desire to act creatively in the face of practical and often pressing issues in their lives in organizations and communities; calls for an engagement with people in collaborative relationship, opening new communicative spaces" (Koshy et al. 2011, p. 9). All members in the workshops acted as partners in a changing process "according to their own knowledge and expertise" (Koshy et al. 2011, p. 17).

Implementation and Reflection

An essential function of action research is reflection; action research is reflective study. In order to create the opportunity for critical reflection, the system and review standards were pilot tested. After the development of the processes and procedures, as well as the standards or criteria for reviews, the review teams prepared to pilot test the system by means of an internal review exercise followed by an external validation or peer review exercise. This quality assurance approach is on a par with the institution's existing quality assurance system of its core business. This alignment of processes and procedures ensured an efficient integration into the existing institutional quality assurance system.

This exercise was an *evidence-led* exercise. Review reports or portfolios were drafted at the end of the exercise by the chairpersons of the different teams who acted as scribes. The scribes received training on report writing. One of the main tasks of the review teams was to collect relevant proof documents for the statements made in the portfolios. Following this exercise, the review teams submitted their portfolios and evidence documents to

external peer reviewers for validation purposes. This exercise allows for external reviewers, consisting of experts and senior peer staff members from other institutions of higher learning in South Africa, to peruse the portfolio documents, and triangulate the findings by means of interviews conducted with staff and students. The chairperson of the external peer review teams submitted to the respective divisions a first draft peer-review report on the outcome of the validation exercise, with commendations and recommendations. The review teams then had the opportunity to peruse the peer review reports, and to reflect on the findings. The principles of NCA underpinned this process, which ensured that consensus was reached between the assessee and assessors on the outcome of the reviews. This process was on a par with NCA as an alternative assessment method based on the assessee and assessors in higher education (Brna et al. 1999). Final changes were made to correct the review reports. The final review reports were submitted to the quality office of the institution. The outcome of the review process informed a remedial action planning process. The staff members of the departments under review had the opportunity to reflect on the standards and processes of the new system. The system was refined by minor changes that were made to the new system and criteria. It was decided that the quality assurance system should not be based on compliance to standards system, but should follow a developmental approach towards quality improvement.

The participants had an opportunity to reflect on their first review experience. Two informal focus group interviews were conducted with two randomly selected representative members of each support function involved in the study. The purpose of this exercise was to determine the perceptions of the participants on the integration of the service functions with the institutional quality assurance processes and the utilisation of Habermas's theories on the initial scepticism of the members. Ten members attended the focus group sessions (five members per session). The researcher conducted the interviews with the groups. Only two questions were asked: What was good about the experience you had during the development and implementation of the new quality assurance system, and what was the bad experiences?

The interviews revealed the following positive remarks:

- The participation of the members in the development processes contributed to their knowledge of the institution's quality assurance system, which counteracts the initial fears for quality assurance processes that some of the members had.
- The members' active involvement in the planning, implementation and refinement phases of the project enhances a sense of ownership of the system.
- Knowledge and the utilisation of concepts such as NCA during reviews empowered the participants and the assessors to take part in the assessment process, and to reach mutual agreements on the outcome of the review processes.
- The value of the notion of ideal speech situation, and the action research approach with its elements of continuous reflection, have a positive impact not only on the development phases but also on the refinement of the system.
- The participation of the members in the process and the recognition of their contributions that had a positive influence on the development and refinement of the system enhanced a sense of membership (belonging).
- The role and involvement of the researcher, as advisor, set the direction during the phases of the study.

The following are negative comments:

- The action research process was time consuming.

- Concepts such as CA and NCA are complex, especially for non-academic members of the support service departments.
- It was not always possible to participate in all activities due to day-to-day work-related responsibilities of participants.
- There was a high level of absence of senior management during the study.
- External peer reviewers are not always familiar with concepts such as NCA, as well as practical implementation of it during reviews.

Future Action: A Model for the Review of Support Services Based on NCA

Resulting from the study, the following diagram, Diagram 1, was developed by the researcher in collaboration with key stakeholders of the service function units. The model explains the new processes for the self-review and peer review exercise of the service functions at the university. The diagram indicates the three key stakeholders in the process, *inter alia* the Quality Promotion Unit or QPU (A) that activates the processes (1) by informing a respective division that it is due for its review (a review cycle of three years). The QPU meets with the senior managers of the respective division under review (B) and assists in the establishment of a review team. The QPU conducts information sessions with the review team and familiarises them with the rationale for reviews, the procedures, the standards or criteria, and the NCA approach. The team has the opportunity during these sessions to reflect and to reach consensus on the proposed criteria. The review team conducts a self-review exercise (2) against the above-mentioned criteria, and collects the relevant evidence. The chairperson of the team acts as a scribe and writes a self-assessment report or portfolio with evidence.

The portfolio document is submitted to the QPU (3) for perusal and feedback. The NCA approach underpins this process. Therefore, the QPU has the opportunity to triangulate the outcome of the self-review process by utilising quantitative and qualitative methods, *inter alia* conducting focus group interviews and satisfaction surveys with staff and students. If consensus is reached on the outcome of the self-review exercises, the division under review submits the portfolio report (4) for perusal and validation by an external peer review team (C). The chairperson of the review team drafts a chairperson's report with commendations and recommendations. A draft report is submitted to the division under review (5) for their perusal and reflection, based on the principles of NCA. If consensus is reached, the final report is submitted to the division under review (6). A remedial action process, in collaboration with the QPU, follows the submission of the final report.
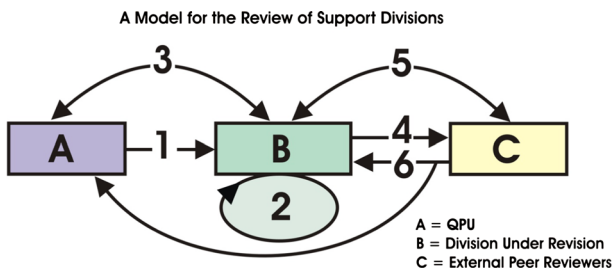

Diagram 1 Review model for support services

Concluding Remarks

The implementation of action research methodology in this study contributed to the development of a solution for the gap in the university's quality assurance system. Its focus on change (Ebersöhn et al. 2010, p. 124) helps the staff members of the institution's support services to experience transformation through participation. From a Habermasian point of view, participation and the notion of the ideal speech situation, was central to the study. The conditions of ideal speech and the principles of NCA underpinned the interactions between the different role players, *inter alia* the QPU, the review teams, and the external peer reviewers. The quality assurance system that was developed is not based on a punitive system of fear but an approach to develop and enhance the quality of services rendered to the core business of the institution. This notion is on a par with the view of the HEQC (CHE 2002, p. 3); that the national quality assurance model should not be characterised by punitive measurements. This aligns with Habermas's notions of strategic action or bureaucratic power. Therefore, only as a last resort and only in circumstances when CA is not working, should management shift to Habermas's strategic action or bureaucratic power.

It was important, with regard to the development of a quality assurance system, for the support divisions to reach consensus with the participants on the processes and procedures for the revision of functions, which contribute largely to the ownership of the process. Leviton and Hughes (1981, p. 542) state that it is imperative, in this process, to clarify the goals for the assessment by effectively communicating the stakeholders' need for information.

The critical reflection of the external review panels on the portfolio documents and the validation of the outcome of the self-assessment exercise, by using the principles of NCA, ensured the validity and reliability of the findings because of the negotiated review and evidence-led processes. All role players, both assessees and assessors had the opportunity to ask and to answer questions, to make and reply to objectives, and to give arguments and justifications. The same processes were followed between the QPU and the review teams during the remedial action phase after the reviews. During the latter, the recommendations in the portfolio documents, and the recommendations in the external chairpersons' reports, were used to inform a remedial action plan. The creation of an ideal speech situation is crucial during this process, in order to ensure that all agents, *inter alia* the quality promotion and respective division under review, are actively involved in setting standards (and not facts, with reference to Habermas' view) that are acceptable for both agents. In Habermas' (1996, p. 459) answer on how a legitimate system of law is possible, he states that norms are valid if the affected persons could agree by means of participation and rational discourse. From this point of view, the minimum standards and processes for quality assurance of support functions can only be acceptable if the relevant stakeholders reach consensus. Another aspect in the conceptualisation phase was Habermas's notion of a permanent risk of dissensus. This point of Habermas is applicable for developers and implementers of a quality assurance system for supporting functions. The support functions under review (assessees) should be encouraged, and they should feel free to question the system and its minimum standards continuously, which will contribute to the refinement and acceptability of the system. This is only possible if a non-authoritarian approach (Pieterse 1990, p. 237) is followed, based on the principles of CA and NCA.

In retrospect, the study could have drawn on the principles of critical utopian research (CUAR), as defined by Bladt and Nielsen (2013), in order to create free spaces where the participants can create "alternative realities". Furthermore, the hierarchy implied in the

different roles, positions and job levels of the team, for example the researcher as an academic, the supervisors as line managers and the workers, as well as the external pressure of expectations from the institution that all institutional activities should form part of an integrated quality management system, created fields of power. There are, unfortunately, unanswered power questions such as: Was the researcher's assignment by the team to conduct the literature study and to interview the participants during the initial phases of the study a hierarchically positioning of him as an *upper* (an academic and quality manager), while the rest of the participants regarded themselves as the *lowers* (non-academics and workers)?. Therefore, how equal was the relationship amongst the participants, and how did the worker—non-academic—participants experience their role as co-researchers? With regard to all the mutual agreements after sometimes, lengthy discussions, was the participants' loyal commitment to mutual agreements during the study a result of active participation as emancipated members, or were there sometimes participants that gave in for the sake of group consensus and/or the presence of the researcher, who is also the quality manager?

This study gives a critical reflection on the development process of a new quality assurance system and tests Habermas's CA and NCA theories as mechanisms that ensure non-authoritarian communication, as well as negotiated assessment during reviews. The study was conducted within conditions of ideal speech situations, where participants participate to understand each other and to reach mutual consensus through argumentative actions. The interactive processes and engagement of the participants in the development of a new quality assurance system counteracted, to a large extent, the initial scepticism of some of the participants. Through a range of workshops, the participants succeeded in developing a quality assurance system that generates management information that can feed into ongoing processes of reviews, and planning/re-planning, which form part of the institution's system of continuous improvement.

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