

Programme Accreditation - Experiences at a University Of Technology in South Africa

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Abstract:

Tshwane University of Technology is a leading higher education institution offering career-focused academic programmes. It is the largest residential University of Technology on the African continent. The university offers academic programmes that are compliant with internal quality assurance requirements as well as external legislative requirements. All academic programmes offered by higher education (private and public) institutions in South Africa, must be approved by the Department of Education, accredited by the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) of the Council on Higher Education, and in the third instance, be registered on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) of the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). The Directorate of Quality Promotion is responsible for the quality assurance of all academic programmes institutionally, before submitting them externally.

Keywords: Accreditation, merger, programme, Technikon, University of Technology.

1. INTRODUCTION

With the advent of a democratic dispensation in South Africa, a new constitution was developed. This marked the beginning of a process that included amongst others, a unitary higher education system. As part of the changes that affected the higher education sector, three tertiary institutions, Technikon¹ Northwest, Technikon Northern Gauteng and Technikon Pretoria, were merged to form Tshwane University of Technology (TUT). TUT was established on 1 January 2004 [1]. As a leading residential university of technology on the African continent, it enrolls more than fifty thousand students yearly with six campuses. The university cares for underprivileged students, and enrolls students from neighbouring countries, and some international students. The university has seven faculties namely the Arts; Economics and Finance; Engineering and the Built Environment; Humanities; Information and Communication Technology; and Management Sciences; Science. Being a University of Technology (UoT) the university offers career-focused academic programmes an emphasis on entrepreneurship.

2. OUR MANDATE AND APPROACH

The Directorate of Quality Promotion (DQP) is the central unit responsible for quality and quality assurance functions of the university. It has a staff component of nine and is headed by a director. The DQP has been mandated by the university council to quality assure, review and audit academic and non-academic processes (excluding financial processes); monitor, evaluate and

report academic and non-academic processes; and promote the quality of products and services of the institution.

Our approach to quality assurance as applied to one of the functions of the central quality unit, programme accreditation, is based on the Approach, Deployment, Results, and Improvement (ADRI) cycle [2]. There are two objectives of the approach to quality assurance namely accountability and development. Currently the two objectives are pursued asymmetrically with development enjoying a greater portion of the two. The reason for promoting development over accountability is amongst others, to assist faculties to generate baseline data for their programmes, whilst at the same time to experience the various quality assurance processes.

3. PROGRAMME ACCREDITATION

Legislative requirements

The offering of academic programmes by both private and public institutions is regulated. Private institutions need to be registered with the Department of Education (DoE). Once registered, they are further required to register all academic programmes with the DoE. On the other hand, public higher education institutions are promulgated by an act of parliament. TUT is a public higher education institution. Public higher education institutions are required to apply for approval of all their academic programmes with the DoE, for funding purposes. Once programmes are approved, the DoE advises higher education institutions to be accredited with the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) of the Council on Higher Education. The HEQC is responsible for assuring the quality of all academic programmes offered in South Africa. The HEQC executes its function through:

- Programme Accreditation and Coordination
- Institutional Audits and
- Quality Promotion and Capacity Development [3]

The DoE advises higher education institutions to register all qualifications on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). One of the latest improvements of the NQF is the introduction of the new Higher Education Qualifications Framework (HEQF) [4]. The old NQF consisted of a maximum of eight (8) levels whereas the new HEQF improves the NQF to ten (levels).

Internal Accreditation

TUT is offering career-oriented programmes and focuses on a three year diploma programme. The majority of programmes offered by the university require students to spend about six months of the three years at a workplace related to their programme. This forms part of the Work Integrated Learning (WIL) component of the curriculum. Institutionally academic programmes need to be

¹ A Technikon is now called a University of Technology

approved by various structures. Programmes are conceptualised at Departmental level and academic departments submit their programme applications to their Faculty Boards, who in turn submit the application, after their inputs, to the university Senate for approval. The Senate is the main institutional structure responsible for programme approval. The Directorate of Quality Promotion (DQP) is responsible for the quality assurance of all programme applications before they are submitted externally. The process of accreditation covers both whole programmes and short learning programmes (short courses). This paper focuses on full programmes, and excludes accreditation of short learning programmes. The internal accreditation process is aligned to the HEQC accreditation process. The HEQC has developed a criteria manual [6], which guides the programme accreditation within the higher education sector. New programmes undergo a two phase accreditation, namely, candidacy phase and the accreditation phase.

During the candidacy phase of new programme accreditation, nine criteria are used to provide the minimum standards for each criterion. The following are the nine criteria of the candidacy phase, namely:

- Programme design (Criterion 1)
- Student recruitment, admission and selection (Criterion 2)
- Staffing (Criterion 3 - 4)
- Teaching and learning strategy (Criterion 5)
- Student assessment policies and procedures (Criterion 6)
- Infrastructure and library resources (Criterion 7)
- Programme administrative services (Criterion 8)
- Postgraduate policies, procedures and regulations (Criterion 9)

The programme will be provisionally accredited and may be offered based on the decision of the HEQC Accreditation Committee. Once the first cohort of students in the programme qualifies, a second phase, the accreditation phase has to be fulfilled. The following are the criteria used during the accreditation phase, namely:

- Programme coordination (Criterion 10)
- Academic development for student success (Criterion 11)
- Teaching and learning interactions (Criterion 12)
- Student assessment practices (Criterion 13 - 14)
- Coordination of work-based learning (Criterion 15)
- Delivery of postgraduate programmes (Criterion 16)
- Student retention and throughput rates (Criterion 17)
- Programme impact (Criterion 18)
- Programme review (Criterion 19)

Based on accreditation application documentation submitted for the accreditation phase, the decision of the accrediting body, the HEQC, will either provide unconditional accreditation when the programme exceeds minimum standards or when it complies with minimum standards. The application will be accredited with conditions when the application needs improvements. Finally, the application will not be accredited if it does not meet the minimum standards.

The Directorate of Quality Promotion advises and quality assures programmes within the parameters of the HEQC accreditation criteria.

External Accreditation

The programme application is submitted to the DoE as mentioned above. The DoE approves the application and recommends that the application be submitted to both the HEQC and SAQA. The HEQC accreditation process needs a special mention in that it is online [5]. The HEQC-Online system requires that a single system administrator be appointed and notification of this appointment be sent to the HEQC. The system administrator has rights to allocate usernames and passwords institutionally. At TUT the administrator interacts with the academic community in quality assuring the application internally. Before the application process begins, the DQP arranges for orientation workshops for working on the HEQC-Online system. A number of consultation meetings are held with programme teams to address their needs. Once the needs of the academic programme team are clarified, the application process begins. Various versions of the application form are exchanged between the system administrator and the applicant (representing the programme team). Upon finalising the application process, the system administrator submits the application online to the HEQC on behalf of the applicant. The HEQC processes the application and responds to the institution, giving the decision of the Accreditation Committee of the HEQC. The decision of the HEQC may contain conditions that the institution would have to address. Once an improvement plan is developed, a progress report addressing the conditions is sent to the HEQC. The HEQC responds to allow the institution to offer the programme.

The SAQA registration of programmes on the NQF is a statutory requirement which finalises the application process. As mentioned earlier, the higher education component of the NQF, called the HEQF, came into effect during 01st January 2009. Its implementation was a challenge as the different faculties were already grappling with the merger process. The application for the SAQA registration addresses the following areas, namely [7],

- Title (including qualification type, NQF level and credits)
- Rationale
- Purpose
- Level, total credits, modules (including fundamental, core and elective modules) and learning assumed to be in place.
- Field and sub-field of the qualification
- Exit level outcomes and associated assessment criteria
- International comparability
- Recognition of prior learning
- Articulation possibilities with related qualifications
- Moderation options
- Critical cross-field outcomes and
- Criteria for the registration of assessors.

4. CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENTS

In order to be true to being a learning organisation, the DQP performs a meta-evaluation on challenges encountered during the accreditation process. A earlier pilot meta-evaluation was based on the use of international standards [8]. The standards are classified into:

- Utility standards
- Feasibility standards
- Propriety standards and
- Accuracy standards.

Meta-evaluation has since become part of our process improvement initiatives. The outcomes of the meta-evaluation are used to improve future programme accreditation applications. It is also used to improve our policies and procedures.

All documentation generated within the directorate is quality assured internally. This involves submitting the document to colleagues for review. The review is usually done on electronic copies. A document version control is maintained.

The DQP maintains an electronic quality management system which archives a large variety of documents, organised systematically.

This is part of the directorates, commitment to continuous quality improvement.

5. CONCLUSION

Programme accreditation at TUT is done within the legislative requirements of the Department of Education, the Higher Education Quality Committee and the South African Qualifications Authority. The DQP is responsible for quality assuring all academic programme applications before they are submitted to external regulatory bodies.

In order to meet the needs of our clients, consultative meetings are organised to obtain clarity on their

requirements. Once this is known, workshops and additional support are arranged. The DQP prepares and facilitates the signing-off of all applications to the statutory bodies. Feedback from the statutory bodies is forwarded to academic departments for attention. All quality improvement plans of new programmes are monitored and evaluated. The DQP saves both the hard and electronic copies of the applications. The process is used as a learning opportunity which culminates in continuous improvement. This commitment to quality is in line with the institutions' vision of being a quality-driven university of technology at the cutting edge of innovation.

Programme accreditation at TUT is informed by market needs. Advisory bodies consisting of industry experts, professional body members, academic peers, alumni and the community are instrumental in providing the required market needs.

6. REFERENCES

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