



Involving Students in Designing Open Distance Learning Programmes: A Case of Adult Education

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.47814/ijssrr.v6i8.1470>

Abstract

Globally, open distance learning (ODL) in higher education is receiving positive attention in internal and external quality assurance procedures and practices. The purpose of this paper is to focus on learner involvement in developing programmes in the Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) department of the University of South Africa (Unisa) as a case study. Unisa is currently evaluating and revising programmes to ensure that quality is maintained. The study reported in this paper was a typical case study using a qualitative research approach. This was an exploratory research project where lecturers were interviewed. The paper used Community of Inquiry as a theoretical framework to collect and analyse data. The involvement of students enhances quality teaching and learning in ODL. Academics need to listen to student's voices and accord them value. Practitioners should be encouraged to develop modules alongside student input. Students are regarded as important stakeholders in universities. The curriculum should be responsive to the socio-economic issues of society. Research involving students in designing open distance learning programmes has not been adequately studied in adult education. In this paper, I argue that involving students in designing programmes will strengthen the quality of the programme. The case study will add value to the existing literature of student involvement in designing quality programmes in adult education.

Keywords: *Programme Qualification Mix; Adult Learner; Open Distance Learning; Student Support; E-Learning*

Introduction

The University of South Africa (Unisa) is one of the oldest and largest Open Distance Learning (ODL) institutions in the world. The institution has been offering programmes in distance education for over 150 years and began as a correspondence institution, and an examining body for other universities in South Africa. Its recent evolution from a distance education institution to a modern ODeL university occurred over a period of a lengthy period during which it merged with two other institutions to become a

comprehensive university. It has recently been classed as a mega university on the grounds that, since 2011, according to Zawada (2019: 285), Unisa has enrolled up to 355 000 students per annum in its substantive colleges.

Within the broader context of South African public higher education, success and retention are major concerns, particularly at Unisa with its large student numbers (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2012), yet, to date, the notions of quality and quality assurance have not been researched in depth in South African institutions. Against such a context, this paper explores the involvement of students in designing Open Distance Learning programmes within a larger framework of quality teaching and learning. As Daniel (2019: 201) asserts: “Given their large student numbers, open universities can, in principle, afford considerable investments in learning materials, student support, and administrative systems to ensure very high quality”.

This paper sets out to explore the hypothesis that involving students in programme design will result in a better quality of programme, one that is responsive to the society and context in which students find themselves. The term ‘student involvement’ refers to the process, mechanisms, channels and platforms whereby students are encouraged to actively take part in decision-making in the areas of governance and management, quality assurance, and teaching and learning in higher education institutions. The term is used interchangeably with ‘student engagement’ (Ashwin & McVitty 2015). This is a case study which forms the preliminary research in the form of interviews with academics in a single department and is the basis for a larger research project.

Research undertaken in the area of quality assurance includes the functional apparatus of quality assurance (Zawada 2019), designing community of inquiry in online courses (Flock 2020), compliance with accreditation (Dattey, Westerheijden & Hofman 2019), enhancing the postgraduate promise effectively through tracer studies (2020), student engagement in quality assurance (2006), quality assurance practices in ODL (2019), quality assurance assessment (Lucander & Christersson, 2020), amongst others, but the concept of student involvement in designing programmes has not been adequately studied in the South African context. Significantly, the issues surrounding the inclusion of students’ voices in different aspects of quality have evolved over the years (Strydom & Loots 2020:20). These different activities of involvement also imply the different roles students adopt (Seale 2016). Canning (2017: 519) argues that the student voice, in relation to quality enhancement, can be likened to a “consumer panel” concept that places the university firmly as a business and the students as customers.

What is new in this case study is the involvement of students in designing programmes in the Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) department at the University of South Africa (Unisa). ABET is an academic department in the College of Education which is one of the largest colleges at the university. The department registers a diverse student body and seeks to design quality programmes that match the needs of its students. Thus programmes designed under this banner should respond to societal needs as well as to the economy of South Africa. Previously, programmes designed in ABET have not responded effectively to societal needs, and were not learner centred. This paper argues that involving students in programme design will enhance quality through effective learner-centredness. The brief literature review above has identified a gap in the research, and the current research hopes to add new insights to the existing body knowledge of quality assurance.

The main research question identified in this paper is: in what ways does the inclusion of students in designing *Open Distance Learning programmes at the University of South Africa enhance the quality of those programmes? The case study looks at this question from the perspective of a single department (ABET) at Unisa.*

Unisa students study at a distance away from a physical campus which means that they do not attend face to face lessons in classrooms, and they study on their own without the presence of lecturers and, in some cases, without tutors. As an open university, Unisa has, along with other ODL institutions,

played an essential role in making university-level education more accessible to the general public by removing various physical, financial and educational barriers to university entrance (Lee 2017).

More recently, open universities have tried to meet the needs of under-served students who are often adults with multiple social responsibilities and/who are studying under circumstances that render them disadvantaged in several ways. Through ODL, access is extended to those students who previously did not have entry to higher education owing to geographical, social, and economic constraints. Unisa, as an ODL institution, and as a mega university, is receiving particular scrutiny from national organisations that oversee quality in higher education in regard to its through-put rate. Research, therefore, into ways in which programmes are designed in an ODL context, and, particularly at Unisa, is both timeous and crucial. Along with other higher education institutions, Unisa is rethinking and redefining its Programme Qualification Mix (PQM) to align its programmes with national quality assurance criteria.

Recent thinking around programme design acknowledges that students are the most important clients in teaching and learning along with the idea that students are now consumers of higher education which itself now operates as a global market (Baldwin & James, 2000). As claimed by Doughty (2007), Wignall (2007), Hillman (2014), and Sellgren (2014), students should get value for their money in higher education. As Boughe (2010) suggests: "...many institutions in South Africa were developed with the explicit aim of ensuring skilled labour for the teaching profession and for the civil services, and this had profound implications for both the types of programmes offered and for curricula design and pedagogy".

This paper avers that involving students in designing programmes is akin to being responsive to societal needs, invoking Unisa's core values of transformation and social justice. Since quality teaching and learning promotes good citizenship, it follows that students as future citizens should contribute to programme design, and so to their own future.

Literature Review

According to the CHE in South Africa (CHE 2017 (a), 2017 (b)) an effective programme focuses on the students' experiences as well as being an output that changes student's lives and expectations (CHE, 2017a, 2017b). The way in which different stakeholders' views of quality differ are apparent if one compares the expectations of students, parents, and academics (Elassy, 2015). Internationally, Distance Education has always been uniquely challenged to provide evidence of the quality of its programmes, as opposed to the traditional face-to-face (f2f) or contact programmes and universities. Unisa has been mandated to offer higher education programmes to students who are scattered across both urban and rural areas. its programmes are accredited by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DoHET), the Council for Higher Education (CHE), and the South African Qualification Authority (SAQA).

The concept of quality assurance is defined differently by different authors. In Higher Education (HE), quality assurance refers to the policies, actions, standards and procedures that enhance quality and meet pre-determined quality criteria (Stella and Gnanam 2004; Tait 1997). Moreover, the concept has evolved from the idea of quality central (QC) in the manufacturing industry, as currently, we are seeing the concept shifting from industry to education.

According to Doherty (2008: 256), the notion of quality in higher education is, at best, elusive, relative, and even subjective. Poole (2010:9) concludes that the concept of quality is variable, multi-dimensional, and remains contested. Elassy (2015) also refers to the concept of quality as being relative and contextual, and points out, for example, how conceptions of quality differ between different stakeholders, such as students and staff. Marshall (2016: 2015) then engages the widely accepted parameters used in quality assurance (QA) frameworks of quality as fitness for purpose, quality as value for money and quality as transformation.

In the same vein, Lancthem and Jung (2012) support the notion that “suitability of graduates for the labour market is increasingly viewed as a measure of quality”. Quality assurance can be a means for governments to maintain control and ensure not only accountability but can be used to encourage a degree of compliance to policy requirements or to control a burgeoning private sector (Harvey and Newton 2007, 225).

Despite these articles on what quality assurance is, there are relatively few research findings that focus on student involvement in designing quality programmes in ODL. Meier (2007) highlights “developing social connections among students from different geographical contexts”, and Oliver discusses synchronous versus asynchronous activity offerings (Oliver, 2016). Similarly, Lekena and Bayaga (2018: 57) note that “over 50 per cent of students, typically those from low-income or deprived circumstances, drop out due to financial struggles to carry the direct and indirect costs of university attendance”. Quality student support remains key in an open distance and e-learning (ODeL) context especially at beginner levels where other factors influencing the first year experience in South Africa include family and support structures (Daniels 2017), tutors (Mckay 2016), support services (Jordaan, 2016) and higher order thinking skills (Faragher and Huijser 2014).

This could suggest that there is a lack of interest in and understanding of the involvement of students among practitioners of quality assurance. There is no doubt that students are the central university stakeholders and that higher education institutions remain accountable to their stakeholders, so it follows that students’ input needs to be taken very seriously in teaching and learning. Allowing students an informed voice in teaching and learning and involving them in designing programmes will give them the opportunity to work with the decision makers of the institution. In turn, this will increase their sense of identity and pride as co-compilers of their study material and, hopefully, add to their self-esteem. Confident students who are self-aware, motivated and self-organising are more likely to be successful in their academic endeavours.

The following section discusses the delivery mode of teaching and learning at Unisa.

Unisa uses a blended mode of delivery, namely, online and print, in line with its ODeL model. Proliferating technologies are expanding the options for ODeL but discrimination is key in this regard. Some open universities teach entirely online, whereas others use printed materials in addition to digital offerings, but there is general agreement that information and communication technologies (ICT) can prove most useful in the administrative and student support functions (Daniel 2019: 203). However, internet connectivity still poses challenges for students enrolled in institutions of higher learning, particularly in the global south, and this affects their involvement in co-designing teaching and learning material.

There is no doubt that new technologies are seen as an enabler in increasing access to higher education and enhancing quality processes and practices. Contemporary technologies allow for more rapid feedback on students’ work, while teachers can update and revise learning materials more frequently than they can with printed materials (Daniel 2019: 202). Digital literacy, digital proficiency and digital fluency are key issues in this context not only in the student population but also in the staff component. As the CHE (2020) asserts: “involvement of the intended beneficiaries in the design and implementation processes of intervention programmes often yields better results and outcomes. In the same manner, the involvement of students in quality matters is of paramount importance since students are at the receiving end of the teaching and learning experience”.

Students enter an institution of higher learning to study and acquire knowledge that will hopefully enable them to bring about developmental change in themselves and their society. Increasingly, the effectiveness of study programmes of higher education institutions is measured by a graduate’s success in the workplace (Kinash et al, 2016, Sha et al, 2015). Less easily measurable is the impact a graduate makes in his or her society. To increase students’ accountability, the Department of Higher Education Training

Act (1997) asks that institutions of higher learning involve and engage students in decision making, governance, and teaching and learning. As consumers of knowledge, students should be made aware of their potential involvement in quality assurance and promotion systems and structures.

It is still possible, with judicious design and management, to increase numbers, improve quality and cut costs all at the same time (Daniel 2010: 202). Some open universities are therefore insisting that all full-time professors be substantially involved in tutoring the courses they have developed (Daniel 2019: 205). This may increase internal and external quality assurance in teaching, learning, research, innovation, and community engagement. Since quality assurance and promotion are acknowledged as integral components of the higher education delivery value chain, the involvement of students in quality assurance and promotion processes at the institutional and national levels can contribute positively towards enhancing academic success for students (Saidi 2020:1).

However, research findings for involving students in designing quality programmes in ODL are sometimes scarce. In the words of Subotzky and Prinsloo (2011), while access has been expanding substantially, the academic success of students has not improved significantly. To address this gap, the researcher has focused on the development of Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) programmes and the ways in which student involvement could add value in terms of quality.

Distance education functions as a substantial subsystem in South African higher education, contributing up to 40% of the total number of higher education students (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2014). However, as previously touched on, there is considerable scepticism amongst academics from face to face universities as well as the public about the alleged quality of open and distance education. Ramanujam (2017) argues that until 1995, open universities had major challenges with respect to being accepted by learners, society and the job market on quality grounds, among other things. Perraton (2007: 207) insists that “there were two contesting views on open and distance learning. The first view held that the growth of ODL is something that has provided education to thousands, even millions, for whom it would otherwise not have been available. The second view is that ODL is perceived, by students and ministries of education alike, as second-rate system, which offers a shadow of education while withholding its real substance.”

As educators, we recognise and applaud the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2030 which stipulate that: “by 2030, ensure equal access for all to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education including university education (UNESCO 2018). Our challenge lies in meeting this goal. This paper explores one, perhaps limited, way in which we could do that.

The section that follows discusses how the research method for this paper was implemented.

Methodology

Kobus et al (2016:17) define a research design as a plan or strategy that moves from the underlying philosophical assumptions to specifying the selection of participants, the data gathering methods to be used, and the data analysis to be done. This case-study has adopted a qualitative research approach to investigate the involvement of students in designing programmes. Macmillan & Schumacher (2014:344) assert that qualitative research begins with assumptions, a world view, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of a research problem that is focused on the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem.

This case study, as part of a larger research project, begins with the first cohort of interviewees who are the lecturers in the ABET department. For the purpose of this research, the preferred option in obtaining the views of lecturers on student involvement in designing programmes was the qualitative research method which deals primarily with interpretive criteria. To ensure validity and reliability, the researcher used face to face interviews, triangulated the data, and checked the cross references with the

participants, by ensuring that the researcher's field notes and transcriptions were submitted to the participants so that they could correct errors. This enabled the researcher to act on their responses. According to Cresswell (2011), triangulation in qualitative process is the process of confirming data from different collection methods.

The researcher discussed and compared all the findings from multiple sources of data and used the interview transcripts on learner involvement from the participants to confirm the results. The researcher used an interview guide that was prepared in advance. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2008:5), the combination of different methodological practices reflects the efforts to ensure in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Sample

The sample consisted of 12 lecturers serving in the ABET Department in Unisa's College of Education. The lecturers comprised eight (8) males and four (4) females. The participants included three (3) Associate Professors, five (5) Senior Lecturers, two (2) Lecturers and two (2) Junior Lecturers. The qualifications of the participants range from doctoral degrees (25%) to honours degrees (16,7%). The sample of participants is involved in teaching, learning, research, community engagement and academic citizenship. 25 The Associate Professors (25%) have a leadership role, that is, their role is to lead the junior academics.

According to the above details, the sample has a diverse education background, and is representative in terms of gender and teaching experience. The researcher employed a purposive sampling which Chilisa and Preece (2005:170) describe as selecting a targeted type of participant. The participants were chosen according to their knowledge of involving students in designing programmes. Macmillan and Schumacher (2014:352) mention that qualitative samples can range from 1 to 40 or more. The sample is usually small compared to samples needed for quantitative research which are required to generate a large population.

Data Collection

To collect the data, the interview guide, prepared in advance, was used to interview and collect data from the participants. The guide consisted of open-ended questions based on student involvement in programme design; how students are involved in the curriculum; the importance of involving students in the curriculum; and recommendations for curriculum design. To collect the data, during the interviews the participants' responses were recorded by an audio-recorder (digital recorder) and then the audio data were transcribed. Ethical considerations were explained to the participants, and consent forms were handed out to sign just before the interviews.

Macmillan & Schumacher (2014: 369) state that in qualitative research there are five major methods of gathering data, namely, observations, interviews, questionnaires, document review, and use of audio-visual materials. The method used by the researcher to collect data was the interview. Participants were interviewed by means of one-on-one and face to face interviews. The questions were based on the research questions, aims and objectives of the research. According to Maree (2010:87), semi-structured interviews are commonly used in research projects to corroborate data emerging from other data sources. The researcher is able to follow up particular interesting avenues that emerge in the interview, and the participant is able to give a fuller picture. The pace of the interview is controlled by treating the interview questions in a standardised and straightforward manner (Kobus et al, 2016:93).

Data Analysis

The data collected and transcribed was lengthy and required intensive examination, understanding, and decoding. The researcher transcribed the audio clips of the participants interviewed into an MsWord document. The collected data information was organised, compared and analysed after it had been transcribed. The data was coded with symbols, descriptive words or unique identifying names

(Kobus et al, 2014:116). The researcher used content analysis by means of which the data were coded and themes were identified. In the last stages of the analysis, the data were defined and interpreted in accordance with the codes and themes, and then compared with the research questions. The repeated words, phrases in the content of the interviews were used to form thematic fields.

Findings

The findings of this case study were organised into identified themes as follows:

Student Involvement in the Quality Assurance Process (Theme One)

So for theme 1, this was a question kept deliberately open and general in terms of eliciting responses that showed whether lecturers were in agreement about whether to involve students. The results of this first set of questions elicited mainly positive responses,

Eight (4) participants agreed that students should be involved:

“I think it is a brilliant idea of involving students in quality assurance discourses”; “the students need to be targeted, it must be a specific group,”; “It must be diverse students from different communities,” “ I think it is brilliant to get both all stakeholders”.

In general, there is a common understanding that students should be involved in the quality assurance process.

“I think the students learn differently”; “I think we can still involve them not only in a learning process”; “the stakeholders that we engage is the students that we are targeted to involve them”.

“I think when we write our study guide we must accommodate the students”; “so from our experiences we do accommodate them”; “trying to involve them and engage them in developing study materials in the curriculum development and the module development”.

However, Four (4) participants did not agree that students are fully involved:

“My perception is that learners are not involved in developing the programmes and modules”; “I come to the conclusion that students are not involved in the writing”.

Since the programmes in the College under scrutiny were written without asking the students what was relevant for them or what it is they need from the programmes, or checking with them if this material works or not, diverse views emerge from the interviews whereby the majority indicate that there should be an involvement with students, while a minority indicated that there should be a minimal involvement.

Students as Producers of Knowledge (Theme Two)

On the question of how do you involve students in developing programmes, five (5) participants contrasted sharply in their views:

“As lecturers, we will go and do our own research and after doing those research we come and implement in the modules but they are not reflected exactly in the module. Even though, my knowledge is limited in terms of writing modules”;

“Involve them in Programme Qualification Mix (PQM) discussions, let them have an input”; “Allow them to relate their problems in their areas”; “The programme designers and students can work together to find solutions to these problems”.

The curriculum designed by lecturers should add value to students and to society. Students should be seen as co-producers of knowledge, not mere recipients or consumers of knowledge. Students are part of society, that is, the needs that they have are the needs of the society. Along these lines, seven (7) participants indicated they can involve them by:

“First identifying current needs in general”; “needs will enable one to compete in the global world”; “Comparing old programme with the new one, by interviewing students about the gaps which existed in the old programmes”; “especially students who are unemployed because their qualifications do not match the demands by companies”.

Student Governance in Curriculum Development (Theme 3)

The following questions ask the participants about the role of student governance in the pursuit of internal and external quality assurance.

Five (5) participants said:

“Is not sure on how students are involved”; “A questionnaire can be developed and sent to as many students as possible asking for their comment”; “The alumini desk can also provide suggestions on what to improve on the existing programme”.

Issues of quality assurance are hotly debated in institutions of higher learning. The following section explores how student involvement should inform quality assurance discourse in the future. The roles of involving the students are clearly defined and contextualised.

Three (3) participants raised the following issues:

“Accommodating them, learning or in terms of development,” “to address their needs so I think focus group will be a good idea” , “I think the students should be asked to state down their needs regarding, the programmes,” “Students must also realize that the programme is developed for them not us.”

The responses stress that programme design can be enhanced by the inclusion of students in the process.

Participant Recommendations in Developing the Programme (Theme 4)

The following section addresses the recommendations by the participants in the interviews. The participants gave diverse views in recommending the involvement of students in developing the programme. Six (6) participants agreed that:

“ students come from public centres and they can be involved using the contact sessions, focus group and research”; “The academics can integrate the latest technology and development”; “I am not conversant with different structures of the university”; “Students who is dealing with academic issues should be asked to be involved” ; “I would recommend that students should be directly involved” ; “Students should be partners or have some role in module design - this could be through the input they make, or through working with the module designers”.

When designing programmes, academics are guided by Unisa quality assurance guidelines, approaches and procedures. The following participant explains how students can be involved in designing programmes that meet quality assurance guidelines:

“Obviously we need to go through a quality assurance process; so, I just think it will enrich the whole process, it will raise the level of the quality because mostly we as lecturers are just focusing in theory because curriculum development mainly focus on theory, so by involving practicals and real life involvement that is the way to go and it will enhance the quality process, something is old and theory and it has not been piloted, so in piloting this programme I think it is important in involving the students.”

This participant talks about the importance of incorporating quality systems and structures to enhance programme design. The following participants added the importance of student governance in promoting quality programmes to the conversation. Three (3) participants highlighted the issues as follows:

“I am not sure if at the Student Representative Council (SRC) level there is a departmental representative student, but I think if there is a SRC representative at the departmental level. That representative should be part of us when developing the students.”

Stakeholder engagement in developing programmes is significant in enhancing quality programmes. The programme should be piloted to students with similar contexts and backgrounds. This is what one participant suggests:

“The issue of involving students is one way of ensuring quality in developing a programme.” “The involvement of students is also ensuring quality of the programme because you should have consulted different stakeholders, beside that you shall have followed normal ways of involving other stakeholders.”

This is an interesting way of enhancing quality assurance promotion. The participants below underscore the importance of both internal and external quality assurance practices. The following participant concludes by highlighting that:

Quality programmes are programmes that have specific goals to achieve, they have detailed plan on how to achieve that and they in fact focused in achieving that; so, they are also time bound in achieving that. So, I would say any programme that have element of achieving those they are quality programme.

Discussion of the Results

The concept of student involvement is a current debate in higher education circles. In one sense, students as stakeholders should be involved at all levels of higher education institutions. Besides adding value to institutional structures and process, this also fosters student development towards becoming active and responsible citizens (Cook- Sather, Bovil & Felten 2014). However, their involvement is not without limitations. Student involvement in promoting quality assurance could contribute towards student success in higher education. There are so many areas that students can be involved. Historically, students have not been regarded as partners in designing programmes despite policies at Unisa that support their participation in governance. One must question why this is so. Are students deemed to be responsible citizens capable of contributing towards governance and management, yet insufficiently skilled to participate in academic planning?

The institution registers diverse students and therefore it is important to use an inclusive approach in involving them in programme design. The more students are involved, the greater the likelihood that they will succeed in their studies (Kappe & Van der Flier 2012, Korobova and Starobin 2015). The students should be seen as co-producers and partners in producing teaching and learning content in the higher education sector (Dattey, Westerheijden & Hofman, 2019: 304).

In higher education today, academics should hear and recognise students’ voices because their involvement add value to the quality programmes. The following response addresses how students learn. The participant stresses the importance of involving students, an idea supported by Dattey et al, 2019, 308).

The curriculum should be responsive to socio-economic issues of society. Simply put, students should be taught what is relevant for them. Nudzor et al (2020, 192) remind us that employability defines study programme effectiveness in contemporary higher education institutions. The students should thrive

in the market and the community. The participant does concur that involving students is important even though some academics have limited knowledge of writing programmes and modules.

In addition to involving students in designing programmes, Dattey, Westerheijden and Hofman (2019: 308) add that students are also interviewed to ascertain their level of satisfaction with the higher education delivery, as part of the assessment exercise for accreditation. Mudehwa-Gonhovi, Galloway and Moyo (2018) similarly report on the liberation students' experience when contributing to knowledge creation through participating in dialogue pedagogy. Seale (2016) reminds us that students are change agents in society and it behoves a university to be partners in that change. One way to achieve such a partnership is by involving students in academic issues.

A further issue emerging from this case study is the idea that involving students improves sustained high-quality teaching in an academic department. Thus, the benefit is not only a no-way process but is mutually beneficial. The case study could be enlarged in scope to include tracer studies that can be used to improve existing programmes by sending questionnaires to alumni to receive feedback about their experiences in the labour market. Feeding this information into the curriculum will also benefit staff and students, thus completing the circle.

Limitations of the Present Study and Suggestions for Future Research

The study focuses on a single academic department in the College of Education at Unisa so the findings cannot be generalised to other distance education and face to face institutions globally. However, lessons can be drawn and compared to other higher education contexts and even to face to face institutions. The study employed a qualitative approach but a quantitative approach could be used in the next round of research to survey a diverse student body. A quantitative study would also offer an in-depth exploration of student views on co-creating a curriculum. Tracer studies can be used to explore the issues surrounding student involvement by using the experience and opinions of past students.

A practical limitation is the print-based format of the case study echoing the printed study guides used at present. Since Unisa is using an open distance and elearning model, some modules and programmes are currently being moved from print to online. Further studies could be carried out to explore how students respond to online studies and how this could affect their contribution to the programme qualification mix. Such studies may reveal that students experience levels of difficulty with online tuition and this may impact on quality.

Conclusions

The case study is of necessity only a first stage of a larger research project but results already indicate that Unisa could consider instituting formal systems and structures to promote student involvement in teaching and learning. One way to embed the knowledge gained in this case study could be an impact study measuring the effectiveness of student involvement in quality assurance curriculum design. At present, students are consumers of teaching and learning. Their involvement could make them partners in the process of design. To this end, Unisa should create dialogue between staff and the students to promote authentic engagement. Generally, there is a lack of a participatory culture by students in an academic department yet students could have valuable suggestions and contributions to make on how they want to be engaged in quality assurance systems and structures. The programmes that the academic departments design should be responsive to the society and meet the students where they are since student learning is seen as the pathway to a more equitable society. Such learning should equip students to participate more critically in economic, social and political issues. The purpose of higher education is to equip learners to be critical about the way the labour market is structured and to be able to contribute ideas in social and political life. This is not the same as just participating in the labour market, it is about learning critical thinking and learning to participate with others in thinking through and discussing

problematic issues in society. Student involvement in designing programmes will contribute to the South African National Development Plan and to the Sustainable Development Goals.

Undeniably, many institutions of higher learning have taken initiatives to redefine and rethink internal and external quality assurance promotion practices. Universities are considered as places where knowledge is generated in the service of society. The National Plan for Higher Education states that higher education has immense potential to contribute to the formation of a socially just society, and the 2013 White Paper on the post-school sector lists social justice as the first of its policy objectives (CHE, 2016, 143). From the literature reviewed so far, a major change in higher education has been the introduction of quality assurance which has been subjected to sharp and persistent scrutiny in higher education sector. Invariably, academic departments have their own quality assurance systems and structures and implement their own internal quality assurance measures with the objective of enhancing student success in teaching and learning. This case study suggests that by involving students in these quality assurance procedures from the outset, greater success will emanate in the form of a responsive and relevant PQM.

The case study used a qualitative research approach. Forthcoming research into this topic will add quantitative data to the equation and thus provide a thicker description about the student experience (Gonyea & Gorgi, 2012, Halloran et al, 2014, Hendry et al, 2007, Jackson & Trochim, 2002). The research will also add greater value to the literature on quality and student involvement by extending its compass to a wider field of reference, from a single department to an entire university, for example.

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