ASSESSING THE QUALITY OF TEACHING AND LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION: PERSPECTIVES FROM A SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT. This research investigates the notions of quality teaching and learning at Mandela University, centering on lecturers and students as pivotal stakeholders. Using Schindler et al.'s model, the study explored how these internal groups perceive quality in higher education (HE). A qualitative, participative, and visual methodology, inspired by the Mmogo-method® and grounded in social inclusion theory, was employed. This approach fostered an interactive environment for a collective understanding of HE quality through collaboration and participation. The results revealed differing views between lecturers and students on what defines quality. Lecturers viewed it as an action-oriented process, emphasizing tangible elements such as inputs, outputs, policies, and strategic areas. In contrast, students perceived quality more subjectively, focusing on intangible aspects, particularly the attitudes within the lecturer-student relationship. The practical implications of the study suggest the potential for a comprehensive evaluation process to foster a quality-driven culture at Mandela University. It underscores the significance of collaboration, communication, cooperation, and meaningful engagement among all stakeholders during both development and implementation phases. Although the context's influence on defining quality in HE was not markedly different, notable references included Africa's challenges and the graduates' commitment to their communities. Overall, this study redefines perceptions of quality in higher education, highlighting the essential role of stakeholder involvement in nurturing a quality-focused institutional

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culture. By embracing diverse perspectives and committing to continuous improvement in teaching and learning, it proposes enhancing the overall quality of higher education at Mandela University.

Keywords: *Quality assurance; Higher Education, Teaching, Learning, Mandela University*

INTRODUCTION

The rapid changes brought about by the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) have resulted in a significant gap between the skills that university graduates possess and the needs of employers. This discrepancy underscores the necessity of ensuring high-quality education in institutions of higher learning (Kim, 2018). Quality assurance, therefore, is crucial for ensuring that graduates possess the relevant skills and attributes gained from their degrees. It is defined as the systematic evaluation of an organization or curriculum to ascertain whether satisfactory educational standards are met (Calamet, 2022). Similarly, Cardoso, Rosa, Videira, and Amaral (2019) view quality assurance as a quality management measure that provides confidence that quality requirements are being fulfilled. This indicates that maintaining quality through regular assurance processes is essential for ensuring accountability in higher education.

According to the Council on Higher Education (2021), quality in higher education is a multidimensional and subjective concept. The perspective of the university needs to be understood within the context of the catchment community and the quality requirements of other stakeholders. Effective quality monitoring should, therefore, extend beyond traditional precepts to reflect local needs and realities, as well as the needs of stakeholders and resources (Leiber, 2019). Quality assurance in higher education is critical for students' achievement of significant objectives (2019). However, the quest for a universally accepted definition of quality has been unsuccessful due to the diversity of ideas about what quality entails (Elken & Stensaker, 2018). This study aims to develop a co-created working definition of quality in higher education rather than searching for a singular definition.

Historically, the discourse on quality assurance in higher education has been dominated by models mimicking industrial quality (Ekman et al., 2018). However, this approach is increasingly unsuitable for higher education, as human behavior is unpredictable, making it impossible to guarantee the quality of the product (graduate) (Duignan & Jackson, 2022). This research explores the author's experience as a quality practitioner in higher education in South Africa, specifically at Nelson Mandela University. The author's journey highlights the

challenges faced by the Council on Higher Education (CHE) in ensuring quality in higher education. The Quality Advancement Unit (QAU) at Mandela University revealed a systemic flaw in the Quality Advancement Conceptual Framework, which required evaluating quality based on input versus output. This led to a focus on quality assurance (QA) as accountability, emphasizing the quantification of institutional inputs and outputs. The term quality enhancement (QE) was introduced to promote good teaching practices and student experiences (Glaw et al., 2017). According to Rozsnyai (2010, p. 77), quality can be enhanced, controlled, assessed, evaluated, reviewed, assured, or simply managed; however, quality remains intangible. Various scholars assert that the complexity of determining quality in higher education arises because it is relative to the stakeholder involved. Different stakeholders across departments, disciplines, and faculties within the same or different institutions tend to perceive quality differently (Watty, 2005; Kleijnen, Dolmas & van Hout, 2011; Cardoso et al., 2013; Jungblut et al., 2015). Hence, this study focuses on the following research questions:

- What are student perspectives regarding the quality of teaching and learning at Mandela University?
- How do lecturers perceive the quality of teaching and learning at Mandela University?

PROBLEM STATEMENT

This study examines the significance of Quality Assurance (QA) in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in South Africa, which have diverse histories, student bodies, and faculties. It emphasizes the need for an institutional culture of quality that diverges from an industrial model unsuitable for human growth and development (Cheng, 2017). The study suggests that all activities, from curriculum planning to assessment, should aim to enhance quality. However, it has been observed that QA frameworks often do not consider the expertise of academics in relation to their relationship-building with students (Hauptman, 2020). This results in quality being driven by a context-specific, authentically created common understanding suitable for a constantly changing world of work (Loukkola et al., 2020). An alternative approach is needed where students are at the forefront of these conversations as active participants rather than passive recipients. The study proposes that an effective QA system for higher education should consist of various entities and processes, with the academy leading by inviting full participation from all stakeholders within the institution. Institutions must be proactive, or they risk intervention by the government or statutory bodies with a stake in the academic enterprise. This study represents a novel alignment of QA with the academic project of each university, considering the human element as primary in defining, framing, and authenticating quality.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social inclusion is crucial in South Africa due to the apartheid history of exclusionary practices, particularly for persons of color (Vlăsceanu et al., 2004). Despite three decades of democracy, these vestiges persist, causing low self-worth, dignity, equality, and recognition for persons of color (Vroeijenstijn, 1991). Student protests, such as #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall, highlight unresolved societal and political challenges faced by students (Watty, 2005; Watty, 2006). To address these issues, strategies to restore and include the dignity of all South African citizens are needed (Williams & Cappuccini-Ansfield, 2007). Gidley et al.'s theoretical framework offers an integrative approach to quality informed by social inclusion theory. The framework proposes three aspects of social inclusion: equitable access, engaged participation, and empowered success. As universities worldwide undergo massification and globalization, Gidley et al. advocate for liberating universities from neoliberal ideologies. The three circles represent the relationship between neoliberal, social justice, and human potential ideologies, with Empowered Success representing social inclusion in the broadest sense and engaged participation as the narrowest interpretation.
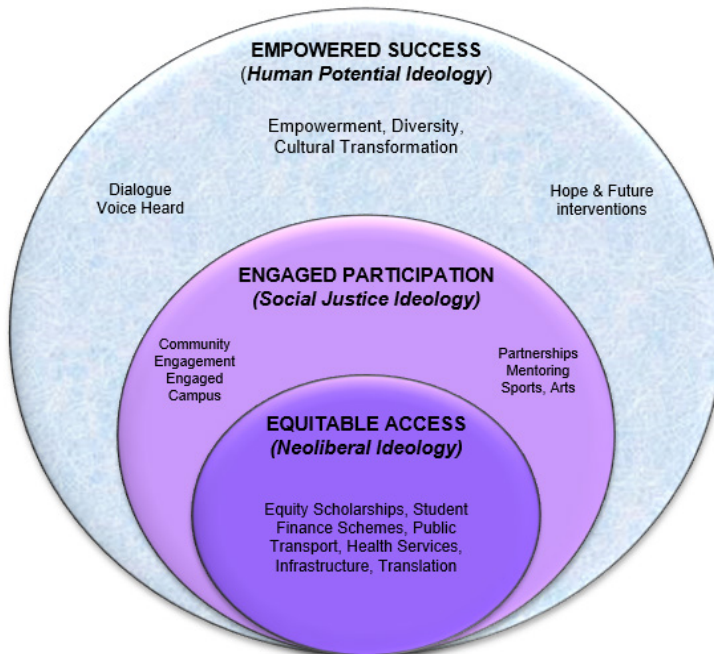

Figure 1. "Interventions of social inclusion theory that increase access, participation and success when situated within underpinning ideologies" (Gidley et al., 2010, p. 138)

Research Methodology

This exploratory study adopted a qualitative research approach to examine the perceptions of quality in higher education (HE) from both lecturers and students. Utilizing a phenomenological case study methodology, the investigation centered on Mandela University. Data collection took place in the natural environments of lecturers and students, emphasizing their views of the classroom as a community of teaching and learning practice. Visual participatory methods (VPMs) were employed, combining visual techniques with participatory approaches. This shift from the positivist paradigm of surveys and questionnaires facilitated engagement, dialogue, and practical outcomes for quality evaluation at Mandela University. The researcher-participant relationship was founded on active engagement, valuing the knowledge and insights contributed by the participants.

Two specific VPMs were utilized: collage-making and an adaptation of the Mmogo-method®, which originated in South Africa. The Mmogo-method® is effective for articulating subjective experiences that are challenging to express verbally and is sensitive to both context and culture, allowing for the exploration of symbolic and contextual meanings of lived experiences. This adaptation empowered participants, fostering a sense of safety and trust. The third sub-question was addressed through collage-making, where groups of lecturers and students collaboratively created collages. The selection of VPMs, particularly the Mmogo-method®, underscored the study's commitment to investigating quality through an indigenous South African research approach that was inclusive, respectful of participants' experiences, and acknowledged their valuable contributions. The second sub-question was answered through journaling, providing participants with a platform for personal reflection. This research explored how two internal stakeholder groups—lecturers and students—perceived quality in HE, specifically in the context of teaching and learning quality at Nelson Mandela University.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review was structured around the following subthemes: quality assurance in higher education, lecturers' perceptions of quality assurance, and students' perceptions of quality assurance.

1. Quality Assurance in Higher Education

The absence of a universally accepted definition of quality in HE presents a significant challenge, affecting the quality of teaching and learning due to varying contexts, types of institutions, and geographical locations (Agar, 1980;

Ball & Wilkinson, 1994; Badat, 2016; Abukari & Corner, 2010). Quality assurance and quality in education (QE) are often conflated, yet they are distinct. Quality assurance is essential as it garners unanimous support, while quality pertains to the nature of learning (Badat, 2016). Quality assurance is an ongoing process to ensure that teaching, learning, and related activities meet established standards (Abukari & Corner, 2010). Conversely, QE involves continuous efforts to enhance the quality of education provided to students (Badat, 2016). Discussions on quality in HE often emphasize transformation, but university work tends to adhere to traditional QA methods, neglecting the impact on internal stakeholders responsible for policy implementation (Ball & Wilkinson, 1994). The ambiguity surrounding the evaluation of quality assurance is often overshadowed by technical and methodological debates aimed at refining the QA approach (Abukari & Corner, 2010).

Morosini et al. (2016) argue that fostering a university with quality necessitates creating spaces where the concept of a quality university can be collaboratively understood by both the community and the institution. Current research, academic publications, and QA agencies have predominantly focused on quality assurance processes, often prioritizing them over the improvement of quality teaching and learning. Quality in HE is a multifaceted concept with various interpretations, such as quality as exceptional, perfection, zero defect, or value-for-money. Quality as fitness for purpose is considered the most inclusive concept, yet it remains subject to change based on the institution's mission, vision, and strategic goals. Schindler et al. (2015) reviewed relevant literature to identify the challenges and strategies hindering a unified definition of quality, concluding that it is an elusive term, interpreted differently by various stakeholders.

2. Lecturers' Perceptions of Quality Assurance in Higher Education

Academics view QA as bureaucratic, an additional burden, and a means for institutional management to exert control (Costandius & Bitzer, 2014; Council on Higher Education, 2012, 2021; Lucander & Christersson, 2020; Luckett, 2006; Varouchas et al., 2018; Vettori, 2018; Winstone et al., 2022). They often regard the evaluation process as a superficial exercise (Council on Higher Education, 2021; Winstone et al., 2022). The focus on quantitative measures of quality has led academics to perceive QA as a passing trend, not to be taken seriously (Lucander & Christersson, 2020).

Quality evaluation is frequently seen as a 'tick-box' exercise, with institutions implementing policies and procedures to monitor effectiveness (Council on Higher Education, 2021; Varouchas et al., 2018). However, lecturers recognize the value of an effective and meaningful QA process that fosters collegial accountability

(Costandius & Bitzer, 2014; Winstone et al., 2022). Doctoral supervisors who receive Teaching Excellence Awards associate quality with transformative learning outcomes in their doctoral candidates (Winstone et al., 2022). Faculty members often find formal, institution-wide quality systems irrelevant to their primary responsibilities of teaching, administration, or research (Council on Higher Education, 2012, 2021; Luckett, 2006). This disconnect results in the QA system being neither integrated nor internalized by staff (Council on Higher Education, 2021).

Academics conceptualize quality in HE in terms of transformation, fitness for purpose, and exceptionality (Lucander & Christersson, 2020). They attribute university quality to competent lecturers, appropriate curriculum content, quality facilities, and strong international rankings (Council on Higher Education, 2021; Lucander & Christersson, 2020). Lecturers primarily associate quality with the teaching process rather than the content delivered (Council on Higher Education, 2021; Lucander & Christersson, 2020; Vettori, 2018). Challenges to quality include delays in replacing departed lecturers, large class sizes, insufficient resources, and student disengagement (Council on Higher Education, 2012; Luckett, 2006; Varouchas et al., 2018; Vettori, 2018). Qualitative issues faced by lecturers include excessive workload, administrative burdens, poor scheduling, inadequate laboratory facilities, and staff shortages (Luckett, 2006; Varouchas et al., 2018; Vettori, 2018).

3. Students' Perceptions of Quality Assurance in Higher Education

While research on quality in HE has traditionally focused on academic responses, the importance of the student experience in quality discourse has gained attention (Lucander & Christersson, 2020; Winstone et al., 2022). Quality in HE is a critical component of any strategic plan in a student-centered educational context (Council on Higher Education, 2021). Student evaluations are considered a key tool for promoting quality enhancement in universities (Council on Higher Education, 2021). Research has examined student perceptions of quality in HE (Dicker et al., 2019; Elassy, 2015a; Jungblut et al., 2015).

Students surveyed on teaching and learning processes highlighted the importance of lecturer quality and support services, including academic, emotional, and psychosocial support (Dicker et al., 2019; Elassy, 2015a). Quality teaching is perceived when students see the connections between learning, knowledge, and evaluations (Elassy, 2015a). However, students associate quality with academic teaching practices and their impact on learning outcomes (Dicker et al., 2019). They adopt a pragmatic view, seeing effective teaching as achieving learning outcomes rather than transformative experiences (Elassy, 2015a).

In a survey of students across five European universities, Jungblut et al. (2015) found that while students viewed themselves as customers, they preferred a quality perspective that centered on their needs but did not necessarily involve active participation. Elassy (2015a) noted that students equated quality with good teaching and well-qualified lecturers, emphasizing the importance of teaching and learning processes in HEIs.

Dicker et al. (2019) found that students perceived education as quality when staff were enthusiastic, approachable, and concerned about student success. Support services, such as libraries, IT, and career guidance, were viewed positively, whereas unapproachable staff had a negative impact. The quality of the teaching experience and the teaching-learning process, as well as the partnership between lecturers and students, depended on developing individual relationships.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS AND ANSWERS TO RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The discussion centered around key themes derived from the two research questions, focusing on the findings revealed during the study as follows: (1) What are student perspectives regarding the quality of teaching and learning at Mandela University? (2) How do lecturers perceive the quality of teaching and learning at Mandela University?

1. Responses of Student Participants

Student participants, who adopted a more relational approach, differed from lecturer participants by perceiving quality teaching and learning as personal experiences closely tied to their emotional and personal fulfillment. They highlighted aspects not raised by lecturer participants, such as racial and cultural differences, diversity and inclusivity in the classroom, and the development of a bond between lecturers and students when lecturers showed genuine interest in their students as individuals.

On a broader level, student participants' views on quality teaching aligned with those of lecturer participants in terms of content delivery, up-to-date notes, competency as graduates, and employability. However, on a more detailed level, students saw quality teaching as an interactive relationship with lecturers. They valued a learning environment where they could connect with lecturers, express opinions, engage in debates, ask questions, and participate in an interactive learning process that went beyond mere facts or extensive information.

Student participants considered assessment crucial to teaching and learning but did not view memorization of facts as a valid measure of learning, emphasizing that "without application of knowledge, it is all pointless" [S11],

[S1], [S9]. They distinguished between information and knowledge, often transitioning to knowledge unconsciously once understanding was achieved. Students were concerned with how information was presented; it should not be given without context. Lecturers' examples needed to be relatable; otherwise, students were left to self-study, resulting in the memorization of large volumes of information for exams.

Figure 2. Student conceptualisations and indicators of quality
within the model of Schindler (Schindler et al., 2015)

This caused significant stress among students, leading many to be content with just passing a module. They often found themselves overwhelmed by the information, rendering it "redundant or useless" [S11]. When lecturers explained information using relatable examples, the concepts became knowledge

that students retained and could apply in other modules and future studies. Student participants made a clear distinction between quality teaching and mere teaching. They believed that while teaching produced employable graduates, it often limited them to specific tasks learned. They critiqued assessment based on memorization, which excluded individual thought and creativity. In contrast, they viewed quality teaching as assessing learning through the application and adaptation of skills, involving case studies and projects that required critical and creative thinking.

2. Perceptions of Lecturer Participants

Lecturer participants perceived the production of competent graduates as a direct outcome of effective teaching. They believed that the high demand for graduates served as a robust indicator of both quality teaching and quality learning. However, the teaching methodologies adopted by these lecturers tended to favor a technicist approach, characterized by a detachment from personal involvement. The quality of teaching was signified by the lecturer's mastery of their discipline, possession of necessary qualifications, and clear understanding of both their teaching role and the students' learning roles. Some lecturers recognized the importance of a collaborative journey between lecturers and students towards graduation [L10]. Conversely, other lecturers saw no systemic opportunities for such collaboration [L11], while others envisioned a reciprocal dynamic where lecturers and students alternated roles [L15], [L8], [L6]. Central to their perspectives was the act of teaching itself. Participants regarded the university as a pivotal entity in establishing and monitoring quality teaching and learning standards at Mandela University. They asserted that, without the support of management, along with relevant policies and guidelines, achieving quality was unattainable.

Lecturer [L11] strongly opposed the top-down approach of senior management dictating lecturers' actions and expectations. [L11] criticized the bureaucratic policies and procedures, referring to them as "red-tape" and arguing that they impeded quality by preventing a student-centered teaching approach. [L11] expressed that graduates from Mandela University were "spineless stooges," constrained by a curriculum overloaded with content, leaving no room for independent thinking. This time pressure forced lecturers to focus on delivering information and facts rather than fostering genuine teaching. Assessments predominantly tested memory recall, devoid of original student thought.

Lecturer participants viewed quality teaching and learning as encompassing all conceptions of quality proposed by Schindler et al. (2015). They further discerned that these conceptions effectively divided one aspect, quality as accountability, into two distinct conceptions: quality as value-for-money

and quality as consistency, reflecting the five conceptions articulated by Harvey and Green (1993). The qualitative nature of the study aimed to capture the subjective understandings and experiences of the lecturers, thus precluding any quantification of which specific conceptions were most or least favored among the 15 participants.

Figure 3. Lecturer conceptualisations and indicators of quality
within the model of Schindler et al. (2015)

Note: Dotted line represents the split in quality as accountable
into quality as value for-money and quality as consistency.

CONCLUSION AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The results of this study align with the most recent directives issued by the Council on Higher Education (CHE), which advocate for the development of an integrated quality management system within South African universities. The CHE's endorsement of integrating transformation and social justice with existing quality assurance (QA) processes in higher education institutions (HEIs) corroborates the study's findings and enhances confidence that these findings will be supported by the broader university community. The new QA framework aims to assess quality improvements based on each university's stated mission and values, thereby preserving the unique context of each institution and eliminating inter-institutional competition by avoiding comparative evaluations. This QA approach, endorsed by the CHE, aligns with the study's participants' suggestions and the theoretical perspectives on quality in higher education that integrate social inclusion with QA practices rooted in social justice and human potential. The CHE's emphasis on transformation as a component of quality conceptualizes quality as transformative, a view that both students and lecturers strongly associate with effective teaching and learning. Leveraging the lead author's expertise as a quality practitioner at Mandela University, this study aims to empirically test the adoption of diverse quality perspectives in higher education.

The study's research design is notably enriched by the use of the adapted Mmogo-method®—an indigenous method involving participants' visual representations interpreted by themselves. This method's creative nature allows participants to explore their subconscious thoughts, which may otherwise remain unarticulated. The structured four-phase approach facilitates individual reflection, uninterrupted sharing, and collaborative discussion of the visual constructions, enabling a collective understanding of quality teaching and learning. Adapting this indigenous method acknowledges the South African context of Mandela University and challenges the assumption that QA methods developed in economically advanced countries are universally superior. Such an approach allows universities in developing regions to select QA methods that align with their stakeholders' perspectives and contextual needs. The ontological and epistemological design of the study, employing participatory and visual methodologies and engaging participants as co-researchers, makes a significant contribution by disentangling quality from conventional academic interpretations through social inclusion theory.

A notable contribution of this research is the inclusion of participants as co-researchers, who interpreted their visual constructions, thereby eliminating the need for traditional member checking. By involving stakeholders in designing

an evaluation framework for quality teaching and learning, the study fosters the development of a meaningful conceptual framework collaboratively, rather than solely by the researcher. The study's findings suggest that Mandela University's internal stakeholders share the researcher's impression that the current evaluation of quality teaching and learning is insufficient and, in some cases, detrimental to teaching quality. This indicates that Mandela University could enhance its quality assessments. The research reveals that effective quality evaluation can be achieved through an inclusive and collaborative approach that both students and lecturers agree would significantly improve teaching and learning, thereby empowering students to achieve their potential and graduate with confidence in their ability to impact the world.

By employing an indigenous, participative, and visual research design, participants were prompted to critically evaluate the quality practices at Mandela University, fostering a shift towards a more effective quality evaluation system. If the participants' views are discussed at departmental or faculty levels, word-of-mouth could facilitate the establishment of an institutional culture of quality that aligns with principles of cooperation, collaboration, and transparency. Continuous reflective practices among both lecturers and students could enable the adoption and potential adaptation of the study's findings at Mandela University, supporting ongoing improvements in teaching and learning.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The research encountered difficulties in data collection, such as managing 30 participants divided into two stakeholder groups, with workshops requiring a minimum of four hours each. Challenges included scheduling conflicts due to the academic calendar, exam periods, and breaks, which hindered the completion of data collection within the academic year. Additionally, students' reluctance to write in English in their reflective journals could have been mitigated by permitting the use of their preferred languages.

Although students valued the creative and visual elements of the workshops, lecturer participation was notably low during the final collage-making workshop. The study also faced constraints due to its part-time doctoral research status, the use of diverse data types, and the subjective nature of identifying intangible markers of quality. Measuring the impact of quality teaching and learning on student transformation remains inherently challenging.

POSSIBILITIES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could expand by incorporating relevant materials from books, bulletins, government white papers, and gazettes, as this study was limited to academic evidence from peer-reviewed publications. Conducting cross-border studies to assess the effectiveness of government initiatives concerning quality assurance in higher education across various African regions would be valuable.

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