



Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia, Inc

Critical Visions

Thinking, learning and researching in higher education

Proceedings of the

29th HERDSA Annual Conference

10-12 July 2006

Perth, Western Australia

Volbrecht, T. (2006) A new day of judgement? Accrediting assessors in South African higher education, in *Critical Visions, Proceedings of the 29th HERDSA Annual Conference, Western Australia, 10-12 July 2006: pp 372-379.*

Published 2006 by the
Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia, Inc
PO Box 27, Milperra, NSW 2214, Australia
www.herdsa.org.au

ISSN: 0155 6223
ISBN: 0 908557 69 8

This research paper was reviewed using a double blind peer review process that meets DEEWR requirements. Two reviewers were appointed on the basis of their independence, expertise and experience and received the full paper devoid of the authors' names and institutions in order to ensure objectivity and anonymity. Where substantial differences existed between the two reviewers, a third reviewer was appointed. Papers were evaluated on the basis of originality, quality of academic merit, relevance to the conference theme and the standard of writing/presentation. Following review, this full paper was presented at the international conference.

Copyright© 2006 HERDSA and the authors. Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of research or private study, criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright, Design and Patent Act, 2005, this publication may only be reproduced, stored or transmitted, in any form or by any means, with the prior permission in writing of the publishers, or in the case of reprographic reproduction in accordance with the terms and licenses issued by the copyright Licensing Agency. Enquiries concerning reproduction outside those terms should be sent to the publishers at the address above.

A new day of judgement? Accrediting assessors in South African higher education

Terry Volbrecht

Cape Peninsula University of Technology, Cape Town, South Africa
volbrecht@cpu.ac.za

Abstract: This paper addresses the questions raised under the theme of “Critical Perspectives”. It examines policy development and practice around assessment in South African higher education in relation to some relevant scholarly literature. A reflective and analytical account of the author’s own experiences at the national and institutional levels focuses on assessment policy-making and assessor training and related approaches to quality assurance and development. Some of the issues it explores are: the relationship between professionalism as an academic and professionalism as an educator; accreditation of assessors as an instance of work-based learning; the relationships among assessment-related policy, strategy, research and practice; and the implications of accreditation for dialogue amongst stakeholders. The conclusion is that current changes in higher education require transformational assessor training, involving dialogue that articulates within and across various and fluid stakeholder groupings, rather than a regime in which educators are condemned to relentless surveillance, compliance and overwork.

Keywords: Assessment quality, tertiary educators, professionalism, accreditation

Introduction

I would like to begin with some questions that could be posed within critical perspectives taken by stakeholders who, in the words of the call for contributions for this conference, “experience, inform, guide and implement policy, theory and practice” in higher education. In choosing to focus on assessment in higher education, I want to ask:

- What is quality in assessment practice in higher education? How is it developed? How is it measured?
- Who develops assessors and how is this done?
- What staff development initiatives are most likely to have a positive impact on assessment practices?
- What does transformational assessor training look like?

With these questions in mind I want to focus on a particular staff development initiative which has been introduced at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) through adapting an example set by Rhodes University. At CPUT this initiative involves the institutional accreditation of assessors through the assessment of portfolios developed in completion of a formal qualification, the Higher Diploma Higher Education and Training (HDHET)¹, or in completion of a Unit Standard forming part of this qualification and entitled: “Design, develop and implement assessment of learning in Higher Education and Training” (USHET02). The particular question I want to pose in relation to this and similar initiatives is: What are some of the significant implications of accrediting assessors in higher education?

¹ The HDHET was originally registered on the South African National Qualifications Framework as the Post-graduate Certificate in Higher Education and Training (PGCHET).

Recognising that accreditation can itself be considered a form of assessment opens up some of the complexity of both assessment and accreditation as units of analysis. With regard to assessment, in this paper I am primarily interested in measurements of the quality of student performance (summative assessment) and in the provision of input and feedback to promote learning and achievement of outcomes (formative assessment) (Knight 2000: 276). I do not attempt to engage comprehensively with the penetration of assessment in its various guises into almost every aspect of human endeavour (Broadfoot and Black 2004; Leathwood 2005), except in the sense that I

- a) attempt to assess current international, national and institutional trends and practices in the context of what we could call a new ‘assessment regime’;
- b) assess the *validity* and potential of a particular assessment-driven staff development initiative, namely the institutional accreditation of assessors in higher education – an initiative in which staff may be construed as learners and/or students; and
- c) consider some of the ways in which assessment of student and staff learning in higher education articulates or blends with other forms of assessment such as review of courses, programmes and research outputs.

In what follows, I will briefly comment on the methodology I have used to address the key questions and issues I have raised, after which I will contextualise the institutional assessor accreditation initiative in the emergent South African setting. I will then relate some of the changes in South African higher education to global developments and proceed to identify some of the key issues arising from the emerging assessment regime. In conclusion I will briefly address the transformational and oppressive potential of assessor accreditation as part of the new assessment regime.

Methodology

I wish to characterise the methodology I have used to address the questions I have posed by describing it in relation to three modes of knowledge production proposed by the Dutch sociologist Arie Rip.² The three modes he proposes are “controlled circumstances” (“lab” or “textbook” methodology); “natural history”; and “circulation”. I want to take the third of these three modes, which Rip has described as the “circulation of embodied knowledge and partial articulations between local practices” (Rip 2002), and fashion it into a kind of methodology: one that extends elements of Schön’s (1983) “reflection-in-action”, with the practitioner reframed as an analytical observer, through an interpretation (what Rip calls an “aggregation”) of observations made across the various contexts. This aggregation is intended to unpack the “black box” of assessor accreditation in higher education. This unpacking then leads to a *repackaging* of the unit of analysis, what Rip calls “point representation”, with indications of what such repackaging might need to entail.

For example, in considering what is meant by “quality” in assessment, I have experienced, aggregated and reconstructed what a range of stakeholders or role-players have had to say or write about this: e.g. those who have designed the HDHET and USHET02; those academics who have written portfolios in the context of these formal offerings; those who have written the HEQC criteria pertaining to assessment; and those who have researched and published articles on various aspects of assessment in higher education.

² My understanding of Rip’s typology has been derived from reading unpublished papers he has written, as well as through attending his guest lectures in the HDHET and engaging in related informal conversations.

What follows is not a chronological representation of the analytical process. Rather it represents some of knowledge derived from or produced through this process.

Some key terms in the South African context: Accreditation, certification and registration

In pursuing the idea of institutional accreditation of assessors at CPUT we have investigated the relationships among accreditation, certification and registration in the South African context. Some confusion has arisen nationally as a result of the roles played by three Education and Training Quality Assurers in the South African National Qualifications Framework, namely the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), the Council on Higher Education (CHE) through its Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC), and the Education, Training and Development Practices Sector Education and Training Authority (ETDP SETA). The ETDP SETA *certificates* people who are qualified against SAQA-registered generic assessor standards up to level 5 of the NQF³. Providers are *accredited* by the ETDP SETA to offer training against the generic assessor standards. “*Registration*” refers to the right to practice as an assessor and takes place at the ETQA of primary focus (up to level 5) (Heyns: 2002).

The CHE has pointed out on several occasions that this arrangement does not extend beyond level 5 of the NQF. In higher education, institutions are not accredited to offer assessor-training on the basis of having staff who are certificated against NQF-registered assessor standards. At CPUT my colleagues and I are accredited assessor trainers because we have been approved by the HEQC as being fit to be members of the team teaching on the accredited HDHET programme. Furthermore, the right to practise as an assessor in higher education does not require registration. Instead it requires, firstly, that the particular institution deems a person fit to be appointed as a lecturer/assessor⁴ and secondly, that this institution has received a) the approval of the Department of Education to offer a qualification, b) the approval of SAQA to register a qualification, and c) the accreditation of the HEQC for a learning programme leading to this qualification.

In order to receive accreditation from the HEQC, an institution and its particular programmes have to meet a criterion (Criterion 6) that focuses specifically on quality of assessment⁵. The minimum standards required to meet this criterion include “appropriate policies and procedures in all modes of delivery for ... the development of staff competence in assessment” (HEQC: 2004: 4). There are additional minimum standards that relate to assessment at the postgraduate level. Here it is important to note that the right to supervise (and, by implication, to assess at this level) requires that the supervisor

... has a qualification in a relevant field of study higher than, or at least at the same level as, the exit level of the programme she is supervising [;]

³ Level 5 is the first level of higher education on the South African NQF.

⁴ At CPUT short-listed applicants for lecturer posts have to do a presentation to demonstrate their pedagogic competence to a panel that includes a member of the Teaching and Learning Centre. This practice raises several questions. One is whether such presentations provide sufficient evidence to judge whether a person is a competent assessor or not. Another is whether, as an outsider in relation to the discipline or field-based knowledge of the rest of the panel, I am in a position to ascertain whether the applicant understands his or her field (e.g. Physics) sufficiently to ensure competence as a lecturer and an assessor.

⁵ The HEQC’s Criteria for Institutional Audits include a criterion (criterion 11) relating specifically to assessment policy, practices and training.

... an appropriate research track record, as well as experience, expertise and peer recognition in the field of study [and]
... in the case of inexperienced new supervisors, ... ongoing staff development and support, and joint supervision ... explored as an option. (HEQC: 6-7)

Where does this leave Rhodes University and CPUT when it comes to institutional accreditation of assessors? The Chambers 21st Century Dictionary defines accreditation as “official recognition” (Robinson: 1996). In this case it can be regarded as official recognition through certification, either through the HDHET or through certification against the USHET02. At CPUT staff are not accredited if they merely attend the short course based on USHET02 – they have to submit a portfolio of evidence which is assessed by CPUT assessor trainers and moderated.

If institutional accreditation as an assessor is meant to certificate the capacity to engage in formative and summative assessment at all levels of higher education, we need to consider whether the HDHET or USHET02, both pitched at level 7, can provide a valid measure of competence up to level 10⁶. A key finding of the research informing this paper is that it is problematic to assume that accreditation of assessor in higher education can be conferred by academics with relevant “generic” or cross-disciplinary assessment expertise, but without the in-depth knowledge of disciplines or fields with which they have relatively superficial acquaintance. My aggregation of interactions with academics from diverse disciplines and fields suggests that there is knowledge about assessment grounded in these fields or disciplines that needs to be made explicit or recognised in conferring accreditation. The possibilities for this are emerging as a consequence of changes in the nature of assessment in higher education.

The changing nature of assessment in higher education

These changes are a consequence of a number of global developments. Broadly speaking, the location of formal education within emerging discourses about “lifelong learning”, “the learning society” and “the knowledge economy”, has meant that higher education has had to redefine its socio-economic and civic role (Edwards and Usher 2000; Edwards: 1997; Barnett 1994). Increasingly, higher education has had to respond to demands for more public accountability and responsiveness to national needs. This has led to a new emphasis on performativity (Lyotard 1979) and the steady infiltration of competence-based approaches to education and assessment (Barnett 1994; Young 2005). In the professions and professional higher education, efforts to optimise performativity have led researchers, policy-makers and curriculum planners to differentiate professional roles in order to frame capacity-building strategies (e.g. Brew and Boud 1996; Briggs 2005). The PGCHE/HDHET, which is based on roles identified in the South African Norms and Standards for Educators (SACE 2000) is a case in point.

The shift to competence-based or outcomes-based education (OBE) has been accompanied by a number of shifts in assessment practices. These include a shift to criterion-referenced assessment (Leathwood 2005; Royce Sadler 2005; Woolf 2004). OBE has led to increasing variety in assessment instruments and techniques, increasing integration of this variety, and the acquisition of assessment expertise through non-formal and formal training in addition to

⁶ Unit Standard 11 of the HDHET (USHET11) is concerned with research supervision and includes reference to formative and summative assessment, but has limitations in relation to the HEQC criteria, particularly in terms of addressing the disciplinary expertise that needs to underpin assessment.

informal acquisition (Knight 2000). The global shifts in education and assessment I have briefly outlined here are very much in evidence in South Africa, although, as elsewhere, the new regime is frequently contested.

Key issues emerging in the new assessment regime in higher education

Institutional transformation

For those of us involved in Academic Development/Higher Education Development in South African universities, a key issue has been how to mediate between global and national developments on the one hand, and institutional structures and practices on the other. One way of addressing this issue at CPUT has been a participatory process of assessment policy development together with formal and non-formal assessor training. The initiative of institutionally accrediting assessors has emerged in this context. It is not yet clear how far the institution will go in this direction. In the last two years well over a hundred academics have undergone the assessor training, either as part of the HDHET or as part of the institution's ETDP SETA-funded Skills Development Plan. However, only a handful of these academics have chosen to submit a portfolio for the purposes of institutional accreditation as assessors. This may be because the concept of this accreditation has not been adequately conceptualised and advocated in the institution. This is indicative of the difficulty of creating effective dialogue and feedback loops between assessment-related research, policy and practice at both national and institutional levels. At CPUT, which has been going through a merger, neither participatory policy-making nor assessor training has yet been able to resolve the deeply different assessment philosophies of some merging faculties and departments. Whether the systematic implementation of accreditation of assessors would help academics in conflict to resolve their differences about assessment is open to question. The emergent research on teaching, learning and assessment regimes together with the burgeoning literature on assessment more generally could play a valuable role in informing debates and dialogues seeking to align the macro-, meso- and micro levels of assessment practice.

Assessment in relation to academic and educational professionalism

One consequence of the differentiation of professional roles I have referred to in this paper has been a reappraisal of the relationship between academic and educational professionalism in the assessment of student learning. In the literature on assessment in higher education, one finds frequent references to the notion of professional judgement (e.g. Woolf 2005; Shay 2004; Royce Sadler 2004). Usually this seems to refer to a) professionalism derived from one's research-based knowledge of one's field and b) professionalism derived from extensive experience in making summative assessment judgements in collaboration with one's professional colleagues in the field. Nicholls (2001) has suggested that the notion of staff or professional development in higher education is problematic because academics are already professionals. Only relatively recently has the question arisen as to whether academic professionalism thus understood can equip one to use assessment for formative purposes (Leathwood 2005; Price 2005) and what the competences required for formative assessment and for strategic planning of assessment to promote learning might be (Gibbs and Simpson 2004; Yorke 2003; Gibbs 1999). A striking feature of my reading of portfolios submitted for institutional accreditation as an assessor has been the difficulty of deciding how to weight my judgement of the various kinds of professional competence evidenced in the portfolios. This is increasingly leading me to consider whether assessor training should be conceptualised as an instance of work-based learning.

Training and accrediting assessors through work-based learning?

A work-based learning model for training and accrediting assessors might include one or more of the following elements:

- Formal or non-formal training related to the scholarship of assessment in higher education as suggested by Price (2005), offered by specialist staff in Academic Development/Higher Education Development;
- Formal and/or non-formal training related to the scholarship of assessment in a particular field (e.g. Engineering; History; Law);
- Informal training or learning through the experience of being an assessor as part of a community of practice (Price 2005) or teaching and learning regime (Trowler and Cooper 2002);
- As an extension of the above, training or learning through working with a suitably qualified mentor, with the latter having a role to play in assessing evidence of disciplinary expertise and its relation to competence in assessment.

This model would have major implications for the assessment of competence as an assessor and the accreditation that might follow from this (at undergraduate and post-graduate levels). One of these implications is that both formative and summative assessment of academics as assessors may become an instance of a more dialogic, stakeholder-based approach to assessment, with a more clearly defined, differentiated and collaborative understanding of the role of professional judgement in assessment.

Assessment and assessor training as dialogue amongst stakeholders

Broadfoot and Black (2004) have commented on a shift towards seeing assessment as a communicative device between the world of education and the wider society. In similar vein Knight (2002) has noted a shift towards seeing assessment as a device for dialogue amongst stakeholders.

In a scenario for the work-based accreditation of assessors, who might the stakeholders be? In addition to the people who would be involved in the work-based elements I have already suggested, one could include past and present students as well as representatives from professional bodies, where applicable. These representatives might themselves need to undergo some form of training pertaining to new approaches to assessment in higher education and in the world of work (Inman and Vernon 1997).

Conclusion: Towards transformational assessor training and accreditation?

In South Africa questions are often asked about whether and how educational changes and initiatives are contributing to national reconstruction and to the transformation of the apartheid-blighted education system. However, there is a sense in which any assessor training that aligns itself with the emerging global assessment regime in higher education will be transformational, in that the emergent trends require major changes in traditional and habitual practice. If, however, the notion of transformation is tied to the modernist grand narrative of liberation (Lyotard 1979), with the story of post-apartheid South Africa as a sub-plot) we might question, as Allais (2003) has done, whether the dominant general drift at the present time is towards emancipatory transformation.

Similar doubts have been articulated by Broadfoot and Black (2004) and Leathwood (2005), amongst others. They have noted many of the oppressive elements of the emerging

assessment regime. These include increased surveillance as an aspect of an increasingly disciplined culture (Foucault 1979), loss of professionalism with increasing demands for compliance with policies, standards and curricula developed elsewhere (Sachs 2001), and a spiralling tendency to over-assessment and overwork (Broadfoot and Black 2004). If the new assessment regime may be said to herald a new Day of Judgement, we might find ourselves, at any moment in our professional lives, having to judge the extent to which we are working for a heaven of humanistic lifelong learning or a neo-liberal hell on earth.

In the long term, it seems likely that practitioners in Academic Development/Higher Education Development will have a key role to play in working with other academics in reimagining and reconceptualising their professional development so that it can ensure the dynamic complementarity of expertise in education (including assessment) and in the various “home” discipline/s and fields. Collaboration in working on the HDHET has led me to problematise the way in which we are currently implementing the notion of accrediting assessors. A key question that warrants further research is: How do academics themselves see the implications of their accreditation as assessors?

Acknowledgement

I would like to acknowledge the valuable assistance I have received from Professor Arie Rip of the University of Twente in conceptualising the methodology used in this paper.

References

- Allais, S. 2003. The National Qualifications Framework in South Africa: A democratic project trapped in a neo-liberal paradigm? *Journal of Education and Work* 16 (3): 305-332.
- Brew, A and Boud, D. 1996. Preparing for new academic roles: An holistic approach to development. *The International Journal for Academic Development*, 1 (2), 17-25.
- Briggs, S. 2005. Changing roles and competencies of academics. *Active learning in higher education*, Vol. 6 (3): 256-258.
- Broadfoot, P. and Black, P. 2004. Redefining assessment? The first ten years of *Assessment in Education*. *Assessment in Education*, 11 (1): 7-28.
- DoE (Department of Education, South Africa). 1997. Education White Paper 3 – a programme for the transformation of higher education. Pretoria: Government Gazette No. 18207.
- DoE (Department of Education, South Africa). 2000. Norms and standards for educators. Pretoria. Government Gazette, Vol. 415, No. 20844.
- Foucault, M. 1979. *Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison*. London: Peregrine Books.
- Gibbs, Graham. 1999. Using assessment strategically to change the way students learn. In Sally Brown and Angela Glasner (eds), *Assessment matters in higher education: Choosing and using diverse approaches*. Buckingham: The Open University and The Society for Research into Higher Education: 41-53.
- Gibbs, G. and Simpson, C. 2004. Does your assessment support your students’ learning? *Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 1 (3): 3-32.
- Heyns, R. 2002. Letter to Committee Technikon of Principals workshop participants, Durban 23 and 24 July, 2002.
- HEQC (Higher Education Quality Committee, South Africa). 2004. Criteria for programme accreditation. Pretoria: Council on Higher Education.
- Inman, P. and Vernon, S. 1997. Assessing workplace learning: New trends and possibilities. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* No. 75: 75-85.
- Knight, P. 2002. Summative assessment in higher education: Practices in disarray. *Studies in Higher Education* 27 (3), 275-287.
- Lyotard, J-F. 1979. *The post-modern condition: A report on knowledge*. Bennington, G. and Massumi, B. (trans.). Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Leathwood, C. 2005. Assessment policy and practice in higher education: purpose, standards and equity. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, Vol. 30 (3): 307-324.
- Nicholls, G. 2001. *Professional development in higher education*. London: Kogan Page.

- Price, M. 2005. Assessment standards: The role of communities of practice and the scholarship of assessment. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, Vol. 30 (3): 215-230.
- Rip, Arie. 2002. Strategic research, post-modern universities and research training. Paper presented t the International Conference on Science, Training and Careers: Changing modes of Knowledge Production and Labour Markets, University of Twente, 21-22 October.
- Robinson, M. (ed.). 1996. *Chambers 21st Century Dictionary*. Edinburgh: Chambers.
- Sachs, J. 2001. Curriculum control: The cost to teacher professionalism. Paper presented at AARE conference, Fremantle, 3-7 December.
- Schön, D. 1984. *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. New York: Basic Books.
- Shay, S. 2004. The assessment of complex performance: A socially situated interpretive act. *Harvard Educational Review*, 74 (3): 307-329.
- Trowler, P. and Cooper, A. (2002) Teaching and Learning Regimes: implicit theories and recurrent practices in the enhancement of teaching and learning through educational development programmes. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 21 (3): 221-240.
- Yorke, M. 2003. Formative assessment in higher education: Moves towards theory and the enhancement of pedagogic practice. *Higher Education* 45: 477-501.
- Young, M. 2005. National Qualifications Frameworks: their feasibility and effective implementation in developing countries. Report for International Labour Office, Geneva.

Copyright © 2006 Terry Volbrecht: The author assigns to HERDSA and educational non-profit institutions a non-exclusive licence to use this document for personal use and in courses of instruction provided that the article is used in full and this copyright statement is reproduced. The author also grants a non-exclusive licence to HERDSA to publish this document in full on the World Wide Web (prime sites and mirrors) on CD and in printed form within the HERDSA 2006 conference proceedings. Any other usage is prohibited without the express permission of the author.