Reflective practice

Quality Enhancement in Student Affairs and Social Justice: A Reflective Case Study from South Africa

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Abstract

Quality enhancement in student affairs is an integral part of professional practice, and its documentation and reflective evaluation are important in the ongoing professionalisation of student affairs in Africa. This article proposes a way of conceptualising a reflective scholarship of practice in student affairs in Africa and method to conduct reflective practice studies to build a relevant knowledge base. Based on this methodology, it then analyses a student affairs quality enhancement review at a South African university in detail, showing its conceptualisation and implementation, and reflecting on its outcomes. The article thus provides evidence of a 'home-grown', 'activist' quality enhancement review that focuses on key issues in the South African context and the context of the case university: the professionalisation of student affairs, the co-curriculum, and social justice models such as participatory parity, universal design for learning, and student engagement.

Keywords

assessment; higher education; participatory parity; professionalisation; quality assurance; quality enhancement; reflective practice; scholarship of practice; social justice; student engagement; universal design for learning

Introduction

Quality assurance and a commitment to the enhancement of quality in student affairs and services is an integral part of professional practice (Mandew, 2003). While quality assurance (QA) generally refers to processes "designed to ensure that specific standards are met and maintained through policies, procedures, monitoring and evaluation", quality enhancement (QE) is conceptually different in that it focuses on "deliberate, continuous, systematic and measurable improvement" and is meant to facilitate a process to "raise the standards, creating different benchmarks and new standards to be quality assured" (Council on Higher Education [CHE], 2014, pp. 10–11). Both processes are a kind of assessment, i.e. "a systematic and critical process that yields information about what programmes, services, or functions of a student affairs department or division positively contribute to

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students' learning and success and which ones should be improved" (Bresciani, Gardner & Hickmott, 2012, p. 16, in Gansemer-Topf, 2013, p. 26). Unlike the continuous and day-to-day types of assessment done as part of the professional work of student affairs, such as needs assessments, participation and satisfaction surveys, and outcomes assessments (Gansemer-Topf, 2013, p. 27), QA and QE processes provide a macro-level, meta-assessment of student affairs and services. In the South African context, these processes are particularly important as part of the ongoing process of professionalisation and the need to ensure that as higher education further massifies and diversifies, student affairs plays its distinctive role of focusing on the personal, cognitive and emotional growth and maturation of all students as well as enhancing students' attainment of graduate attributes and contributing to student engagement and success (Kuh, 2009; Ludeman, Osfield, Hildago, Oste & Wang, 2009; Luescher-Mamashela, Moja & Schreiber, 2013).

In South Africa, a uniform, systematic national approach to QA in higher education was developed and implemented from the early 2000s. However, only its reconceptualisation in line with a QE model in the last five years has included a deliberate focus on student affairs and services (CHE, 2014, 2016). At the institutional level, a number of South African universities are applying in some functional areas and often for accreditation purposes either the widely used international system of quality assessment in student affairs developed by the American Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS), or specific assessment tools developed by South African professional councils. A key issue with using CAS, as with regard to any QA instruments, is "the transferability of systems established elsewhere in the world" (Harvey & Williams, 2010).

Whereas the national QE process of student affairs and services in South Africa has been well documented by the CHE (e.g. CHE, 2015), there is little literature available as yet on institution-level processes of QA/QE in student affairs in South Africa or more widely across the continent. Annual reports of certain universities, such as Makerere University in Uganda, suggest that quality assessments of student affairs are taking place (MAK, 2013). However, documentation specific to student affairs is scarce, and there is almost no evidence of reflective student affairs scholarship on the topic coming out of Africa. Meanwhile, the professionalisation of student affairs requires a reflective scholarship (Carpenter & Haber-Curran, 2013) that critically engages with national- and institutional-level experiences of QA/QE in student affairs and thus adds to the growing knowledge base of student affairs in Africa.

This article describes and analyses the conceptualisation and implementation of an institutional student affairs QE process at a medium-sized public university in South Africa. The student affairs QE review conducted in the course of 2015 was purposed as means to enhance the quality of student affairs and services at that university. The university leadership intended the review to provide evidence of the 'transformation' of student affairs in line with strategic goals of the university. The review should therefore show how projects and services had been re-conceived over the term of the outgoing dean in line with the university's commitments to social justice, reconfigured as co-curricular programmes, and

were contributing to student engagement, while also producing recommendations for further improvements to this effect. It thus sought to give effect to Tinto's maxim:

> Effective student support does not arise by chance. It is not solely the result of good intentions. Rather it requires the development of an intentional, structured, proactive approach that is coherent, systematic and coordinated in nature. (Tinto, 2014, p. 17)

As a reflection on QE as a student affairs practice at the example of a particular case university, this article considers first the concept and methodology of a reflective scholarship of practice for student affairs in Africa. It proposes a definition of a scholarship of practice in student affairs and a method and way of reporting engagement in reflective practice by means of a scholarly article. It thus provides a practical proposal for a contextually relevant, critically reflective scholarship of practice as foundation for the development of theory grounded in student affairs practice.

The article then introduces the setting and organisation of student affairs and services at the case university at the time of the review, followed by an outline of the conceptualisation of the Student Affairs Review, the principles underpinning it, and its methodology and implementation. In its third part, the outcomes of the review are discussed with reference to the report of the external review panel, and as part of the final reflections it considers the social justice dimensions of the review, its conception as 'activist' review, as well as other learnings that can be derived from the review overall.

A Reflective Scholarship of Practice as a Methodology in Student Affairs

Carpenter and Haber-Curran (2013) discuss key principles involved in the development of scholarly practice in African student affairs to "promote data- and theory-based intentionality of practice" (p. 1). They argue that scholarly practice requires relevant data and theory that is meaningful in an African context. Correspondingly, Blumberg (1990) had argued earlier that scholarly practice requires the intentional development of a body of knowledge that is useful to practitioners; one that does not claim universality but is focused on practice itself; one that is specific to the 'craft' and yet not esoteric or trivial. Based on Blumberg's insightful discussion, a fit-for-purpose scholarship of practice in student affairs therefore involves a number of elements:

- A scholarship of practice in student affairs deals with problems that are meaningful to practitioners and that practitioners can experientially relate to; it understands practice as action, as performance, as a deliberate, skilled way of doing things.
- It studies practice in a scholarly manner that is intentional and part of a process of learning, academically rigorous and systematic, and that results in trustworthy accounts, analyses, and interpretations.
- It can address different kinds of practitioner-relevant knowledges: (1) the nature of the practice and the circumstances it is practised under, and/or (2) matters of practitioners' self-understanding and personal skills. It does so by means of description, analysis, critical reflection, interpretation, and even speculation.

- It seeks to attain a body of knowledge that enables practitioners to transfer learning to their own practice reflectively so as to enhance their practice.
- It produces the empirical building blocks towards the development of a theory of practice that enables scholars to ask yet better questions and reflective practitioners to understand their practice in ways they have not previously.

As a way of translating this conception of a purposeful scholarship of practice in student affairs into the format of a reflective practice article, case studies in Morgan's (2012) book, *Improving the Student Experience*, provide a worthwhile template to draw on. Building on her work, the structure and key components of a reflective practice article could respond to the following points and questions:

- **Contextual information** about the higher education system, the institution and its student body, and the student affairs department where a practice is housed;
- **Title and description of the practice**, i.e. an intervention, project, initiative, programme or service;
- **Reasons for the practice**: Why was this practice developed and adopted? What was its purpose and objectives? Who was the target group? What outcomes were envisaged?
- **Conceptualisation and implementation of the practice**: How was the practice conceived and developed? What was included/excluded? How was the practice implemented? What were its costs (including non-costed issues like time)? How was it managed, monitored and evaluated?
- **Reflections on the practice**: What were the outcomes in terms of achieving its purposes? What worked, what did not work, and why? What recommendations for improvement can be made?
- **Reflections on ethics and transferability**: What ethical considerations must be noted in relation to the practice? What is the potential of transferring the practice to other target groups or implementing it in different institutional and campus settings?
- **Reflections on the account**: What is the trustworthiness of this reflective practice account? What biases may be implicit? How does it contribute to a scholarship of practice in student affairs? What further research may be required?

It is with this definition of a scholarship of practice and related method in mind that this article has been developed.

This article draws on three sets of data:

1. Widely accessible documented data on the higher education system and institution, particularly annual reports, institutional policy documents, and the like;
2. Internal university documents specifically developed for the student affairs review at the case institution. While these documents are not publicly available (e.g. not uploaded on the institutional website), they have been distributed internally and are in no sense 'classified' and can be distributed without restriction; and
3. Personal insights into the review process.

At the time, I was responsible for institutional research at the case university and tasked by the university leadership and QA directorate to conceptualise and implement the student affairs QE review together with the leadership and practitioners of student affairs at the university, as well as other stakeholders. This article is therefore strictly speaking not the reflection of a student affairs practitioner but that of an institutional researcher-cum-QE practitioner at the case university.

Student Affairs and Services at the Case University

In the year preceding its student affairs QE review, the case university celebrated 110 years of existence during which it had become a medium-sized public university operating from two metropolitan campuses in a provincial capital of South Africa and a smaller campus in a rural part of the province. Its student body was made up of just over 31 000 registered students, of which 73% were undergraduate, 22% postgraduate and 5% occasional students; 2 092 were international students, and 2 200 in campus-based residences (and many more in private off-campus student residences and privately rented accommodation surrounding the campuses) (UFS, 2014, p. 10). Overall the student body was starting to reflect the demographic composition of wider South African society.

Having been designated during apartheid as exclusively white, Afrikaans-tuition university, the institution was amongst the public universities in South Africa to undergo a set of far-reaching changes, including an ongoing process of language policy review (e.g. Van der Merwe & Van Reenen, 2016). In the early 1990s, after the removal of restrictions on access for black students, the institution adopted a dual English/Afrikaans tuition model and thereafter admitted increasingly larger numbers of black students. In the early 2000s, the originally white metropolitan campus was merged with two smaller campuses of historically black universities in a deliberate attempt by the national government to break with "the geopolitical imagination of apartheid" in the higher education sector (Asmal, 2002, p. 1). By 2014, the racial composition of the student body had changed in such a way that black students made up 71% and female students 62% of the student body. In contrast, the vast majority of permanent academic and student affairs staff remained white and male (DIRAP, 2016, pp. 9–10).

Student support services were delivered primarily by three independent units: Student Academic Services, the Division of Student Affairs (DSA), and a Centre for Teaching and Learning. The DSA, headed by a dean of student affairs, reported directly to a vice-rector/deputy vice-chancellor responsible for academic and student affairs. The DSA was internally structured into several units and departments, respectively responsible for student governance, student life and leadership (including student media, arts and culture, and leadership development), student housing and residence affairs (including eight clusters of student residences called 'student life colleges'), student counselling and development, a unit for students with disabilities, and a unit for careers development (Dean of Student Affairs, 2014; UFS, 2015, p. 61; see Figure 1).

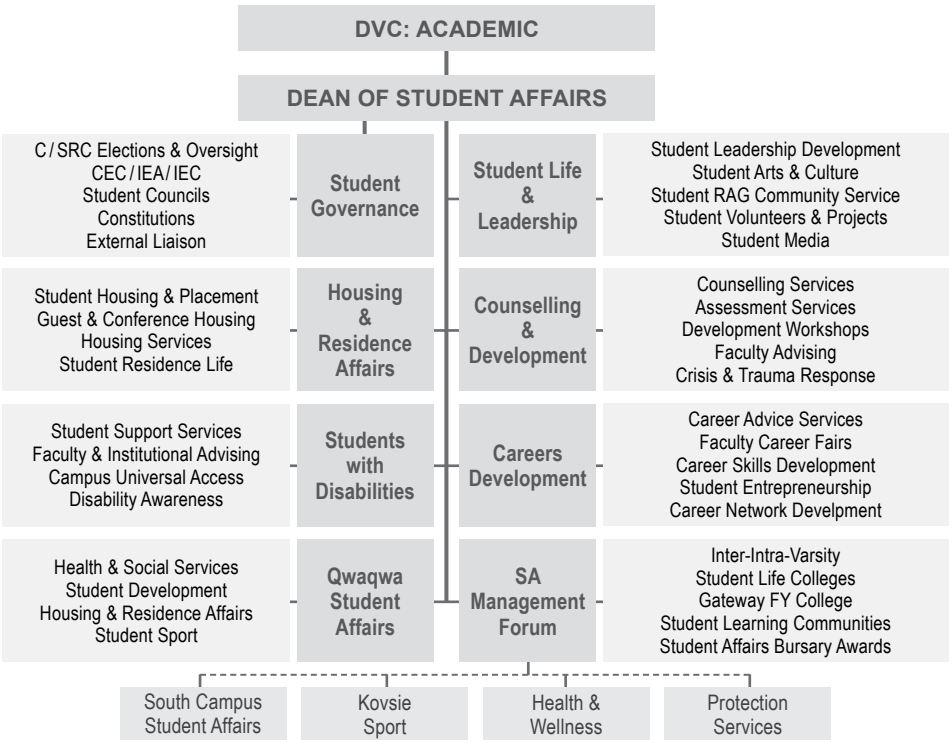

Figure 1: Organisational structure of the DSA
[Source: Dean of Student Affairs, 2014]

Student affairs at the case university was an institutional function operating across the three campuses, with an emphasis (or rather bias) towards the metropolitan, historically white campus. Moreover, a few years ago, the university had notionally established eight student life colleges as clusters of existing on-campus residences and day student houses, which were meant to act as the delivery sites of the student affairs co-curriculum. However, in reality the 'old' centralised structure of student affairs and service model remained operationally dominant and responsible for the delivering of services, training and projects in a traditional centralised 'service model' manner, following the functional areas of student affairs (see Figure 1). The restructuring of student affairs in alignment with the college life model and a co-curriculation of student affairs were considered ongoing processes.

Conceptualising the Review

Given that the dean of student affairs, who had been put in place in the wake of a widely publicised racist incident at the university in 2009 (i.e. the 'Reitz incident' analysed in detail in Van der Merwe and Van Reenen, 2016), was leaving the institution by the end of 2014, an assessment of progress made by the DSA in terms of its transformation was timely. The DSA strategic plan sought to position its core student life function as part of "the heartbeat of the transformation process within various student cohorts" (DSA, 2013, p. 6).

Meanwhile, there was a concern by a new vice-rector responsible for academic and student affairs that the DSA transformation was strong on claims and weak on evidence. A QE review would ensure that the rectorate knew exactly what was being handed over to a new dean due to be appointed in the course of 2015. The institutional QA directorate, which facilitates the process of quality reviews at the university, was tasked to drive the conceptualisation and implementation of a student affairs QE review in collaboration with the DSA and to account for its outcomes to the responsible vice-rector.

The Student Affairs Review was conceived in line with the university's general institutional QE framework (DIRAP, 2014), which outlines the rationale and conceptual and practical principles for QE at the university across its academic core functions. The same also apply to quality reviews of administrative and support functions of the institution, and the framework had previously been applied to a review of the university's library and information services. Within that broad framework, the Student Affairs Review methodology followed closely that of the university's *Guidelines for the Institutional Curriculum Review* (DIRAP, 2012). It was therefore based on QE guidelines originally developed for *academic* learning programmes. This implied that the co-curricular programmes of the DSA ought to be comparable to the curricular programmes offered in the faculties.

As starting points, a set of process principles and substantive review principles were elaborated in collaboration between the university's QA directorate and the DSA. The six process principles to guide the operationalisation of the review were: peer review; honesty and openness; accountability; collegial leadership; programme focus; and knowledge-based improvement (DIRAP, 2015, p. 5). The ten substantive review principles contained in the *Guidelines for the Student Affairs Review* acted as high-level assessment criteria (DIRAP, 2015). They were more contextual to the specific situation of the university, more normative and evidently conceptualised to steer the thinking of student affairs practitioners into key directions.

A key area of assessment was to be the DSA's *contribution to human reconciliation* or what the university called its 'human project'. Commitments to equity and social justice also informed principles such as *open and comprehensive access* (to student affairs programmes) and the notion of *pathways of lived experience*. The assessment should consider the extent to which *all* students[1] have *equal access and opportunity to participate, diversity of perspectives* in programmes and achieve programme goals; and therefore that programmes are designed to *serve a cross-section of students* that is representative in terms of the demographics of the student body.

The principle of *broader and higher impact* focused the assessment not only on questions of *efficiency, effectiveness* and *value for money*, but also prompted the focus on enhancing student success – both in specific academic terms as well as with respect to a number of civic graduate attributes – in line with the assessment principle of *student engagement*. The

1 The listing of relevant demographic characteristics in the *Guidelines* is extensive and includes: race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth; as well as academic qualification, discipline, and year of study.

question here was to reflect on ways in which student affairs programmes enhance student engagement, for instance, by means of using 'high-impact practices' (HIPs).[2]

The idea of co-curriculation infused in the QE review was prominent and meant to provide a way of re-conceptualising student affairs towards strengthening the delivery of interventions as part of co-curricular programmes in support of fostering graduate attributes.[3] Related principles included *co-curricular integrity and alignment with graduate attributes* and the notions of *progression* and *combination*. The argument was that the endpoint of all student affairs restructuring should be a 'seamless' co-curriculum (compare Moja & France, 2015).

The final two substantive principles for the QE review focused respectively on students and staff. The principles of *student-centredness* and *responsiveness to special needs* required evidence to demonstrate the responsiveness of student affairs programmes to student interests and needs. The principles of *professionalism* and *quality* then spoke to the idea that the review ought to enhance the professionalism of student affairs practitioners.

Operationalisation

From the perspective of the practitioners involved in the actual review, the most important part of the *Guidelines for the Student Affairs Review* were the so-called 'focus areas'. The outline of focus areas provided specific instructions for conducting a self-evaluation of all offerings, and the structure of self-evaluation reports. Firstly, it required that departmental ad-hoc task teams were constituted to prepare a complete list of all programmes and activities per department; a list of evidence collected for self-evaluation including existing policies, strategic or action plans, milestones and goals, monitoring data and other evidence of performance such as evaluation surveys, student data and evaluations, etc; and a four- to six-page-long self-evaluation report per programme. In this manner, every department was required to self-evaluate its offerings using the points and questions listed by focus area (see Box 1; DIRAP, 2015, pp. 10–11).

Implementing the Review

The pre-review process unfolded with initial meetings in late 2014 between the outgoing dean of student affairs, the incoming acting dean of student affairs, the vice-rector: academic and student affairs, and the assistant director for institutional research in the university's QA directorate who led the process. During these meetings, subsequent drafts of the *Guidelines for the Student Affairs Review* were discussed. Given the ambitiousness of the QE process,

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2 Student engagement is defined as "the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities" (Kuh, 2009, p. 683). It involves aspects of academic engagement and social integration, as well as social and political engagement (e.g. Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Kuh, 2009; Strydom & Mentz, 2010; Luescher-Mamashela et al., 2015).

3 The graduate attributes proposed in the case university include: (1) scholarship; (2) active *glocal* citizens; (3) lifelong learning; (4) inquiry focused and critical; (5) academic and professional competence; (6) effective knowledge worker; and (7) leaders in communities.

Box 1: Self-evaluation focus area

Focus 1: Design of the programme

- ✓ Illustrate how the programme reflects the interests/needs of students.
- ✓ Describe the purpose, objectives, and strategies of this programme.
- ✓ Does the programme meet specific requirements of national policy and legislation and/or of national/international professional associations in this area of Student Affairs (if applicable)?
- ✓ Compare the purpose and type of programme to the applicable CAS standards and criteria. (This is optional and must be done separately.)
- ✓ Is the programme an integral part of the co-curriculum of the UFS? Consider: How do the programme design and intended outcomes fit into the bigger picture of the co-curriculum and the academic curriculum? Specify the following:
  - Appropriate programme title
  - Intended learning outcomes and/or graduate attributes to be fostered
  - Target students: numbers, year(s) of study, special constituencies; assess the actual number and representivity of participants with programme goals
  - Articulation with other co-curricular and curricular programmes, e.g. UFS gateway programme; UFS101; other relevant curricular and co-curricular programmes.
  - Methodology of programme delivery
- ✓ Discuss the effectiveness of the programme in attaining identified objectives/outcomes and attributes:
  - To what extent are the identified purpose and objectives met and intended learning outcomes and graduate attributes attained? What evidence exists to substantiate this or, in other words, how do you know what you have done well?
  - What challenges and obstacles do the department/office face in accomplishing programme objectives?
  - What has been accomplished and done well?
  - What is needed to achieve objectives and what are your ideas for the future of the programme (especially in relation to the restructured, student life college-based Student Affairs)?
- ✓ Explain how the department addresses the issues of:
  - Professionalism and quality
  - Knowledge-based improvement

Focus 2: Integration in the co-curriculum, college structure, and articulation

- ✓ Does the programme articulate/integrate with the totality of the co-curriculum? Illustrate how the programme (and its activities, events) forms part of a coherent co-curriculum that provides for meaningful articulation with cognate curricular/co-curricular programmes, including those offered by CTL (e.g. UFS 101).
- ✓ Explain how the programme enables combinations with other programmes and progression towards the attainment of graduate attributes.
- ✓ Reflect on the programme's current institutional location in our office and department; its relation to the structure of student life colleges; and its relation to other structures in the curricular and co-curricular space.
- ✓ Reflect on the department's capacity to offer the programme, including the possibility of upscaling and enhancing the programme to reach a broader student population and have a higher impact (also see below).

Focus 3: Human reconciliation and student engagement

- ✓ Demonstrate how the programme acknowledges the importance of human reconciliation by reflecting on:
  - The content and strategies of programme delivery in relation to the UFS human project.
  - The programme purpose, outcomes and types of assessment/evaluation.
  - Integration of human reconciliation in students' lived experience; pathways of lived experience; diversity of perspectives (see 'substantive principles of review' above).
- ✓ Does the programme target any specific groups of students? Reflect on the suitability of limiting access to participation in the programme in terms of:
  - Principles of open and comprehensive access; effective provision with broader and higher impact; responsiveness to student interests and needs (including special needs) (see 'substantive principles of review' above).
  - Resource needs (current costs; capacity constraints; costs of a potential upscaling).
- ✓ Reflect on ways the programme enhances student engagement.
  - How does the programme relate to and impact on students' academic success?
  - Does the methodology of programme delivery involve any high-impact practices of student engagement (such as staff-student interaction; first-year seminars; learning communities; meaningful engagement with diverse others; etc.)?
  - How does it relate to the development of high level graduate competences such as critical thinking skills, leadership skills, civic skills, diversity and social skills (cf. proposed graduate attributes).

[Source: DIRAP (2015, pp. 10–11]

it was clear to all that this would be a laborious undertaking. Two staff members – one in the dean's office and another in the QA directorate – were assigned full-time to work on the review and support student affairs unit heads and staff in the process. In addition, a budget of about R100 000 (USD 8 000) was set aside for the visit of the external panel, to cover all travel costs as well as honoraria for the panel members. As part of the pre-review process, the QA directorate made several presentations to the Student Affairs Management Forum, i.e. a forum of all heads of departments and units in the DSA, and upon invitation, to the individual departments and units included in the QE review. It was also during these meetings that some of the issues arising – including fears of retrenchments – could be addressed.

Almost all student affairs core units were included in the review:

- **The Office of the Dean of Student Affairs**, including but not limited to the DSA Secretariat; the Student Affairs Management Forum; the Student Affairs Research Desk; the student bursary awards; as well as student governance.
- **Department of Student Life**, which was responsible for the first-year orientation programme "Gateway"; student leadership development; student arts and culture; student community service programmes "Receive and Give/RAG"; student volunteers and projects; student media (including the student-run radio and TV station); the "No Student Hungry" campaign; and other programmes and activities.
- **Department of Residence Life**, including the structures and programmes of the student life colleges, as well as its peer mentoring programme.
- **Department of Health and Wellness**, especially including all programmes related to student health and wellness.
- **Student Affairs and Services** offered on the two satellite campuses of the university, including the areas and related units reviewed on the main campus.
- **The Unit for Students with Disabilities** programmes and **Student Counselling and Development**, which also included careers development, asked to be voluntarily included in this review.

The review excluded programmes in student housing and residence affairs other than those offered by the Department of Residence Life. It also excluded the departments responsible for student sport and protection services. Amongst the reasons for this exclusion were that these departments reported to the vice-rector: operations, rather than via the dean of student affairs to the vice-rector: student affairs. The structures of student government, such as the Central Students' Representative Council (SRC), the campus SRCs, and student government structures in student residences, faculties and departments were also excluded and eventually reviewed separately a year later. Overall, the Student Affairs Review was implemented in a two-phase process that officially started in February 2015 and was concluded in August of the same year.

Review Process

The process of evaluation comprised two phases: a self-evaluation of programmes (Phase 1) conducted by the student affairs practitioners themselves; and an external review involving a visiting panel of expert peers (Phase 2). The full process is outlined in Figure 2.

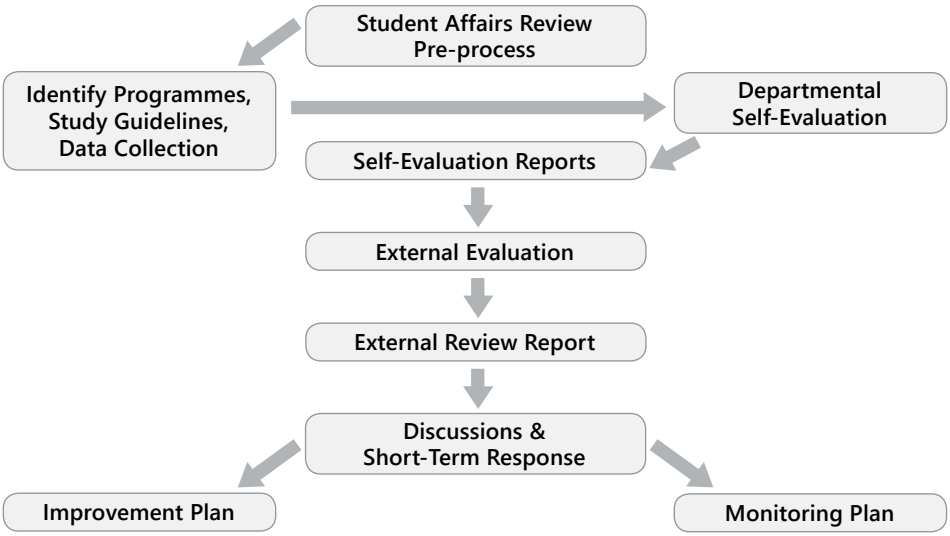

Figure 2: Student Affairs review process
[Source: DIRAP, 2015, p. 13]

Phase 1: Self-evaluation

The process of self-review involved that all units formed task teams to evaluate their programmes in terms of the principles and objectives of the review, using the three focus areas as specific guidelines and template. In addition, it was initially proposed that the acting dean of student affairs, in consultation with programme coordinators, would assist departments in identifying relevant CAS Standards. A CAS standards-related evaluation exercise parallel to the assessment in line with the focus areas (box 1 above) was meant to provide a platform for an (international standards-based) critique in addition to the specific foci of the review. However, most departmental task teams opted *not* to use the CAS standards but to only use the internal review guidelines.

The task teams were appointed by the head of each department and comprised a programme coordinator and others involved in the delivery of a programme (or intervention, activity, project or service) and, as far as possible, a student leader and a programme alumnus as a way of incorporating the student voice in the process. Thus, Phase 1, as a process of self-review, affirmed the professional responsibilities of student affairs practitioners and enabled them to take ownership of the process and accordingly facilitate

a trustworthy review. All self-evaluation reports were concluded and submitted to the QA directorate within three months (by May 2015), following which they were edited and put into a uniform format to be submitted to the members of the external evaluation panel.

Phase 2: External panel evaluation

The purpose of the external peer review was to provide a holistic, external, expert view of student affairs provision at the case university, including commendations of good practice and recommendations for improvement. For this purpose, an external evaluation panel was constituted which originally comprised of six peers selected to have collectively professional and/or academic expertise of all the areas of student affairs under review. Additional appointment criteria were that they needed to have prior assessment experience, a good understanding of the South African and university-specific context, and be representative demographically in terms of race and gender.

On the advice of the QA directorate and in consultation with the acting dean and the Student Affairs Management Forum, the vice-rector appointed: a retired vice-rector of a South African university as chair of the panel; a director of student affairs of a South African university; the author of the student affairs 'bible' *A Guide to Student Services in South Africa* (2003) who at the time was campus director of a university of technology; a clinical psychologist who was director of a local university's centre for student support; an American expert in student affairs and professor of educational leadership working at a university in California; and the director of QA of an East African flagship university. Eventually, only the first five were able to participate in the panel. The panel was provided with summaries of the self-evaluation reports ahead of their site visit. The actual site visit was conducted over a week in June 2015. During their intense time on campus, the panel members perused the self-evaluation reports and related evidence in detail, visited a number of departments, interviewed student affairs staff, students and student leaders, and had meetings with the university leadership.

Outcomes of the review

The external QE panel concluded its work in August 2015 by submitting a 30-page report to the QA directorate. Amongst its first set of recommendations was that student affairs at the university needed to build "a strong and intellectually respected identity" (External Panel 2015, p. 14) and its discourse, culture and practices had to become part of the institutional culture and practices (p. 18). The panel proposed that student affairs adopts a theoretical change-behaviour model for changing the institutional and student culture of the university (p. 16). For this purpose, not only governance and management changes would have to be introduced but there was a need to develop an overarching strategic plan for student affairs aligned to the university's strategic plan (p. 11), campus-specific strategic plans, and a better integration of the DSA across all campuses and units (p. 14). The latter would also help to create a sense of common purpose and belonging across all campuses and eventually ensure equivalence in facilities, resourcing and service provision across all campuses (pp. 10–11).

The co-curriculation of DSA offerings and its interface with the academic curriculum featured strongly in the report. The panel recommended that the DSA conducts a rigorous design, conceptualisation, implementation, and assessment of programmes (p. 15) and ensures that its co-curricular programmes would be informed by a critical pedagogy, that they would be evidence-based and research-driven. It would need to identify high-impact practices and have ongoing QE processes (p. 13). In the process, the DSA should reduce the overall number of student affairs programmes, invest in fewer, stronger, and better designed programmes (p. 15), and create a deliberate, 'hard' interface between the student affairs co-curriculum and the academic curriculum (p. 13). It argued that such a 'hard' interface would be easy to create with the formal curriculum as regards, for example, Student Affairs Arts and Culture and the academic departments of fine arts, drama and theatre arts; Student Affairs Media and the academic Department of Communication Sciences, Student Affairs Volunteerism and the Directorate for Community Engagement, and so forth. (p. 15)

With regard to the college model, the panel argued that the DSA should not consider day students as 'appendages' to the residence system, but consider the development of a day students/commuter students' resource centre and related programmes (informed *inter alia* by needs assessment studies) (p. 7). The college model was seen as an opportunity to emphasise "an academic focus, cultural theme, social justice emphasis, environmental ecological lens, wellness scope, etc." in the creation of student learning communities (pp. 5–7).

Finally, with respect to the professionalisation of student affairs, the report argued that a new, yet to be appointed dean of student affairs should have a doctoral qualification. Collaborations with research and academic units on campus should be harnessed to develop programmes and training programmes on building community, anti-racism, reconciliation, etc. (p. 15). The university's School of Higher Education Studies, in turn, was named as the place to develop short learning courses for DSA staff and eventually professional qualifications focused on student affairs to contribute to the professionalisation of student affairs at the university and beyond (p. 8).

Final Reflections

In keeping with the purposes of a reflective practice account, a number of matters deserve deeper consideration and reflection. They include substantive matters related to the conceptualisation of the QE review, like the way it sought to give effect to notions of social justice, the pitfall of conceiving a QE process too much in activist terms, and process-specific matters such as the locus of accountability in the implementation of an institutional QE review.

Social justice and the QE review

The place of social justice in assessment has received growing attention in scholarly literature on learning assessment (e.g. McArthur, 2016). In context-specific student affairs literature, Schreiber (2014, p. 211) has recently proposed participatory parity, universal design for learning (UDL), and student engagement, as three conceptual models to enhance student affairs' contribution to social justice in South Africa.

She notes that participatory parity involves that student affairs must "create opportunities for people to participate on an equal footing" and that a transformative, social justice approach to student affairs must address the "underlying social structures that [continue to] generate these inequities" (Bozalek & Carolissen, 2014, pp. 15–16, in Schreiber, 2014, p. 214). This implies that "we need to organise student support services and programs in such a way that all students have equal opportunity to interact and participate in them" (Schreiber, 2014, p. 214).

With respect to UDL, Schreiber argues that UDL "affirms students' diversity and promotes flexible learning environments as a normative framework to accommodate the range of individual styles of learning and development". In the practice of student affairs it requires "multiple means of representation", "multiple means of expression", and "enticing students to engage in support and development via multiple routes". UDL thus requires that student affairs services and programmes "span the range of interactions, modalities, styles, and media" so as to reach a diversity of students (Schreiber, 2014, p. 215).

Thirdly, the student engagement model implies that student affairs work must become increasingly "integrated into and articulated with the academic life of the institution". Schreiber argues that there is ample evidence in the literature to show that "the goals of student engagement serve the goals of equity and participation, especially if the engagement framework is conceptualised beyond the normative and focuses on those specific groups for whom engagement with and connection to the academic environment is already a challenge" (Schreiber, 2014, p. 216). Especially groups of students that do not fit the 'traditional' student model need to be reached with newly designed institutional strategies and interventions that promote engagement. The promotion of student engagement in student affairs thus involves bringing on board previously excluded and marginalised student groups, creating opportunities for active and collaborative learning, and promoting learning communities, diverse relationships and affirmative and formative modes of communication amongst students and between staff and students (Schreiber, 2014, p. 216).

It is evident that the student affairs QE review at the case university did not only seek to assess progress of DSA programmes and services towards social justice goals. Rather, by its very conceptualisation and implementation, it sought to actively steer a reconceptualisation of student affairs at the case university towards social justice models and goals. Given the university's history of institutionalised racism, racial and ethnic exclusion, social justice concerns and particularly redress based on race, gender and sexual orientation, and overall the integration of human reconciliation in students' lived experience has been a key area of the strategic re-direction of the institution since 2009. Participatory parity and UDL principles of *open and comprehensive access*, the notion of *pathways of lived experience* and the assessment principle that *all* students should have *equal access and opportunity to participate* in programmes and achieve programme goals, and therefore that programmes ought to be designed to *serve a cross-section of students* that is representative in terms of the demographics of the student body, illustrate this point.

Similarly, the assessment principle of *diversity of perspectives* required reflection in the process of review on the extent to which a programme was oriented towards introducing

students to the complexities of *living in a diverse, multi-cultural, democratic society*, and thus to learn to think critically. The assessment principle of *broader and higher impact* focused the review on questions of participation and student engagement, to move away from a plethora of expensive boutique offerings (many of which were only accessible to the small number of on-campus resident students and a legacy of the university's Afrikaner institutional culture). A future suite of programme offerings thus ought to comprise a smaller number of culturally inclusive *high-impact programmes/activities* offered more cost-effectively to an upscaled number of students that reflect the diversity in the student body. The latter was also a recommendation by the external review panel. With all this in mind, the review thus sought to assess current practice in social justice terms and use social justice concerns for improvement purposes.

The pitfalls of designing a 'home-grown', 'activist' review

Along with the intention to enhance the uptake of social justice models and practices in the DSA, the QE review sought to contribute to professionalisation by emphasising process principles such as peer review, collegiality, professionalism and evidence-based improvement. These two aspects of the change orientation may well be seen as a normal part of the 'activist' intervention of enhancement-focused reviews in the student affairs domain. However, the 'activist' nature of the review went beyond this and overall faced three conceptual problems.

Firstly, the idea that distinct project activities and services should be reviewed *as if they were elements of a co-curricular programme* turned out to be ill-conceived. By the time of the review, the DSA had actually not reconfigured its diverse offerings as co-curricular programmes. Rather, student affairs had continued to operate in departmental 'silos', each offering a distinct and traditional set of projects, training interventions and services. In most cases they had not been designed as a co-curriculum that constructively aligns intended (learning) outcomes with related learning and assessment activities, articulates with other academic and co-curricular offerings, and articulates in terms of progression and combination with other offerings (e.g. Biggs & Tang, 2007). If there was a sense of progression, this was merely within a distinct set of offerings (e.g. in student leadership development where participation in one offering could require prior participation in another offering). As the external panel also pointed out, there was little to no communication and collaboration with the faculties and academic development centre, and thus no sense of an 'interface' between the academic curriculum and what could eventually become the co-curriculum in student affairs (with the exception of careers development, gateway, and student governance, which necessarily coordinated some offerings with faculty structures). Expecting the review to reconceptualise in its self-evaluation what student affairs did *in co-curricular terms* and then assess it *as if* it operated in co-curricular terms, contradicted the idea of reviewing *what is* rather than *what should be*. In this respect, the QA directorate sought to do what the DSA had failed to achieve since 2009: a comprehensive redesigning of student affairs in line with social justice models, a new theory of change, and the co-curriculation thereof.

A second pitfall manifested in relation to *the principle of accountability* built into the process, which it turned out mainly worked bottom-up, but not top down. Too little emphasis was on the accountability of the university and student affairs leadership as to what will happen with the outcomes of the review process. One matter could be resolved: ahead of, and during the review, several student affairs staff expressed the fear that the review could lead to retrenchments. These fears were allayed in staff meetings of the DSA and by an address of the vice-rector to the Student Affairs Management Forum in the course of the review. However, at the end of the review, a lack of accountability of the top university leadership to the DSA revealed itself in another, major way. When the student affairs portfolio was shifted unexpectedly to a different vice-rector, the external panel report and its recommendations were shelved. The new vice-rector did not recognise the importance of the work done. The focus rather turned to crisis management in the face of an escalation of student protests at the university in early 2016, as the #FeesMustFall and #EndOutsourcing campaigns of the SRC and the Free Education Movement turned violent (Luescher, Loader & Mugume, 2017). Nonetheless, while the review itself did not result in an explicit improvement and monitoring plan as envisaged in the process guidelines (see Figure 2 above), the newly appointed dean of student affairs eventually took many of the external panel recommendations on board when he developed an integrated strategic plan for the DSA (see DSA, 2016a, 2016b).

Thirdly, the attempt to do a parallel assessment using CAS standards in addition to the 'home-grown' assessment based on the internal guidelines and focus areas outlined in the *Guidelines for the Student Affairs Review* clearly failed. Student affairs practitioners gave three reasons for having opted out of doing a CAS-based assessment: workload, lack of training and support, and relevance. With regard to the first two, staff noted that the compulsory assessment based on the internal guidelines was already onerous and in addition to normal workloads. They also argued that using an advanced system like CAS required training and support, which was not available to them at such short notice. Finally, in terms of relevance, the argument was that the 'home-grown', internal guidelines were clearly highly applicable to the university context and DSA's strategic repositioning; meanwhile the contextual applicability of CAS standards would require an in-depth consideration, which again needed time and effort that was beyond the review's timelines. The lesson is that in both cases, 'home-grown' and adapted international review methodologies, adequate resourcing is required for their successful conceptualisation and implementation, including staff training, staff time allocation, and finances.

Conclusion

The scholarly documentation of student affairs practices in higher education in Africa is an important process in its professionalisation. This article has sought to make a two-fold contribution by conceptualising a reflective scholarship of practice and related method for producing context-relevant reflective practitioner accounts on student affairs, and then producing such a reflection at the example of a QE review in a South African university.

The article describes and reflects on the conceptualisation, operationalisation and implementation of a 'home-grown', 'activist' student affairs QE review in a South African university in detail. It shows how the review sought to focus on key issues in the South African context and the context of the case university: social justice, the co-curriculation of student affairs services, and professionalisation. It thus provides a practice-relevant empirical example of an institutional QE process in student affairs while also reflecting on the pitfalls that may be encountered along the way.

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