

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Controlling for quality through design

#### 4.1 Introduction

This study used a single case design with embedded units of analysis (Yin, 2003). Data collection and analysis were done through qualitative techniques; the study was exploratory and insider research was employed to uncover actors' meanings and understandings in their natural setting.

The case study focuses on a single site, the University of the Western Cape (UWC), where I have observed that academics implementing a new quality regime often find the processes they have to comply with burdensome and a constraint on the performance of their academic responsibilities. My experience in a quality assurance unit at UWC has suggested that academics find these new demands a distraction, and feel that compliance with quality policy has happened at the expense of quality improvement.

The problem identified is deeply connected with the institutional context. Improving quality at UWC occurs in a context where most students enter the university educationally disadvantaged and academically under-prepared. Results of the 2009 National Benchmark Tests Project (NBT) Pilot, which cannot be presented here as the NBTP agreed that institutional results would not be made public, indicated that students entering UWC scored well below the benchmark for university entry level proficiency in mathematics, quantitative literacy, and academic literacy. UWC has embarked on a trajectory of quality improvement and change designed to shift the institution in the twenty-first century beyond the limitations imposed by its apartheid origins.

This study explores the ways in which academics at UWC engage with the new state-led policy around quality assurance and investigates the impact of policy implementation on academic work at the university.

UWC is one of only two historically disadvantaged universities in South Africa (there were originally ten) which have remained in existence sixteen years after the end of apartheid.

Although it was not chosen as a site of study specifically because of this history, my research was enriched by investigating UWC's particular context. In this regard, the following question echoed in the background during the study and directed my attention to the context within which academic work occurs: How do historically disadvantaged institutions' aspirations in the post-apartheid era impact upon academic practice and quality evaluation?

UWC is a historically disadvantaged institution which has oriented itself towards a transformed future. It has expressed its aspirations in this regard in revised mission and vision statements. The research problem arises out of contestation around the notion of quality, as academics' views conflict with the quality improvement vision of institutional management and with the quality views and requirements of the post-apartheid state.

Understanding the context of the particular case is essential to comprehending the nature of the conflict, since quality improvement has become a far more complex aspiration for UWC, an institution in transition. At the time of this research, the university was attempting to bury the label of inferiority conferred by the apartheid state. While continuing to serve its historically black constituency, it is at the same time propelling itself towards a future of national and global competitiveness.

#### **4.2. Research questions, propositions and sub-questions**

The research question for the study was as follows:

*How do academics in a historically black South African university in transition engage with and implement internal and external quality assurance processes and policies?*

I designed three sub-questions to focus my attention on different aspects of the main research question. Through these, I set out to capture different aspects of the problem that I wished to address through my research. The three sub-questions were as follows:

- How do academics' views of quality differ from those embedded in state policy and those promoted by university managers?
- How do these competing conceptions of quality relate to academics' attitudes to the implementation of quality assurance policy and practices?

- To what extent does the state's focus on routine and strategic quality evaluation engender tension and conflict between and amongst academics and university managers?

I approached the study and its research question with some initial ideas regarding what I expected to find. These were not hypotheses to be tested by the data, but were framed to guide the inquiry, to direct my attention to the existing problem and to provide a foundation against which to reflect the ultimate findings of the case. It was intended that the process of continuous reflection between the original propositions and the research findings emerging from analysis of the data would contribute to the development of credible explanations of the phenomena being studied.

I devised four research propositions. Firstly, that the high level of prescriptiveness imposed by the Evaluative State in the areas of quality, planning and funding diminishes academics' freedom to make decisions and to be innovative. Secondly, that demands for compliance with quality assurance requirements frustrate academics' efforts to improve teaching and learning in historically disadvantaged universities. Thirdly, that these aspirations, articulated in mission and vision statements, are often not known to academics and sometimes conflict with their beliefs and practices. And finally, that historically disadvantaged institutions' aspirations for excellence and competitiveness often conflict with national policy goals and intentions.

These propositions reflected observations I had made during my work in quality evaluation at UWC, and arose out of my perception that academics there were extremely frustrated by the new quality assurance demands. These were often largely administrative and time-consuming, for example those associated with modularisation and external moderation. I also sensed that academics experienced tremendous anxiety and some anger when confronted with quality measures, such as internal reviews of departments, which involved scrutiny of their academic work. This anger was often directed at the people, like me, who were tasked with running the reviews.

During these reviews, academics often appeared perplexed when reviewers asked them questions that required them to relate their work with students to UWC's mission of being an engaged university.

My research propositions were therefore designed to capture these multiple dimensions, specifically the frustration and anxiety associated with quality assurance demands and the confusion which seemed to exist with regard to the university's post-apartheid mission. I had many times listened to the university's Rector speak passionately about UWC's drive for excellence and its potential for greatness, but there often appeared to be an undertone of disappointment with the new state in his conversations. The final hypothesis, that historically disadvantaged institutions' aspirations for excellence and competitiveness often conflict with national policy goals and intentions, aims to capture the essence of what appears to be a dilemma facing UWC, that of an HBU engaging in a struggle to become an institution of quality.

#### **4.3 Researcher proximity**

I approached this research fully aware that my position as an insider would provide both benefits and disadvantages. I had worked at UWC as an academic for eleven years, and then, after a break of four years, returned to take up an administrative position in which I was centrally involved in quality reviews of academic departments. This work entailed arranging departmental reviews and preparing a report of findings and recommendations. Academics often entered the process with much trepidation and reports were often not well-received by reviewed departments.

I was concerned that I might be associated with a quality assurance process which involved close scrutiny of academic processes, an activity that was often resented by academics in reviewed departments. To illustrate my dilemma, I quote one academic who volunteered for the study by answering:

*Yes, fine. But have you not already 'done' me?*

I entered the research process fully aware of the disadvantages of conducting research in a setting in which I was a familiar figure to interviewees and where I was associated with the particular quality assurance roles and functions in UWC described above.

There is much debate in the literature around the notion of researcher proximity (Flyvbjerg, 2006), defined as closeness to the site or to the topic under investigation. Many argue that the case study method, requiring as it does immersion in the research site, is more prone to researcher bias.

The researcher's ability to bring to the case personal experience and in-depth knowledge of the context and the problem has been identified elsewhere as an advantage of researcher proximity. However, this strength has also been construed as a limitation; some have argued that proximity could compromise objectivity and promote verification bias, that is, the tendency for the researcher to find overwhelming support for the research propositions. In summarising this debate, Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2001) conclude that research is strongest when researcher experience is maximised, but that this in itself raises doubts about objectivity.

Two issues are pertinent to insider research. One involves the tacit insider knowledge of the researcher, while the other concerns the relationship between researcher and subjects. A researcher's tacit knowledge may encompass an awareness of the internal politics and jargon of a setting, resulting in shared meanings and understandings between researcher and subjects. The drawback of such shared meanings is that the researcher may be led to make false assumptions, miss important information or misinterpret data, especially during interviewing (Rooney, 2005).

In this investigation, extreme care was taken to avoid asking leading questions which would suggest that I was seeking particular kinds of responses. To limit the possibility of incorrectly pre-empting participants' meanings on the basis of assumptions about our shared experiences in UWC, I asked probing questions about the circumstances and situations referred to by the interviewees. I was aware that familiarity with the context and the problem could lead to my reaching hasty conclusions, without confirming the actual meanings and understandings the interviewees intended to convey.

Secondly, a professional relationship between researcher and subject may result in the subject offering information or explanations that it is hoped the researcher will approve of or expect to hear.

I was very aware of this limitation during the research and took care to distance the investigation from my normal university responsibilities. This was achieved by avoiding any discussion about academic reviews of departments. The omission of such reviews from the scope of the research could be seen as a major gap, but this loss had to be balanced against the threat to the credibility of the research. This was shown to be a clear possibility during the first two or three interviews conducted.

Discussion of the academic reviews in these early interviews resulted in some discomfort both for the interviewees and me, and I was aware of the participants shutting down or withdrawing during such discussions. After these first few interviews, I removed all questions from the interview guide relating to academic reviews of departments.

Issues of trust and confidentiality are relevant to all research, but may become particularly significant during insider research, with the added fear that confidential information could be communicated by the researcher to colleagues with potentially negative consequences for participants. I therefore presented each interviewee with a document explaining the steps I had taken to ensure the confidentiality of any information they might share, and to assure them of their anonymity in the report and that any information they shared could not be traced back to them.

A major advantage of insider research is that interviewees are more likely to relax, feel more comfortable and talk more openly with researchers who are familiar to them (Rooney, 2006). I certainly found this to be the case, as long as I avoided discussion of matters associated with my professional role in the university. Fortunately, my work in UWC was restricted to involvement in departmental reviews; eliminating these from the research scope seemed to facilitate an easier flow of discussion during interviews.

Rooney (2006) has presented three cases of insider research. She describes the cases, including their strengths and limitations, and ponders whether, in the process, the researcher has compromised validity. Her conclusion is simply that the questions of validity directed at insider research should really be asked about all research and that researchers should always be called upon to demonstrate the practical steps they have taken to reduce the impact of personal bias.

#### **4.4 A qualitative approach**

The decision to engage in qualitative as opposed to quantitative research is essentially a philosophical choice and a principled one. In other words, the choice of a research approach is usually value-laden and governed by the particular view of the world held by the researcher.

Many writers have argued in support of the idea that the choice of research methods is governed by epistemological and ontological assumptions, that researchers commonly select research methods on the basis of their understanding of how knowledge is created and of their position with regard to the nature of social reality. This view implies that researchers are drawn to qualitative methods specifically because of their interest in understanding the context in which action takes place, in their individual experiences of phenomena and in their perceptions of reality.

The underlying epistemological approach is that human action is governed by context - influenced by structural conditions as well as by the context's constitutive practices, norms and values. Thus in order to understand human action, one has to study human behaviour in the setting in which it occurs (Marshall and Rossman, 2006).

Denzin and Lincoln's (1994) definition of qualitative research has been widely accepted as foundational in describing the philosophical underpinnings of this form of research, as well as for identifying related approaches, purposes, types and techniques.

*Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials, case study, personal experience, introspective, life story, interview, observational, historical, interactional and visual texts ... that describe routine and problematic moments and meaning in individuals' lives (1994: 2).*

Given the importance of seeing action in context, qualitative research is characterised as an approach to studying behaviour in its natural setting, as a way of contextualising and interpreting human action. Its philosophical underpinning is phenomenological, valuing attempts to understand behaviour from social actors' points of view.

Particular types and forms of research, such as case study and ethnography, have been encouraged for their potential to encompass all the above characteristics of qualitative research. Qualitative data analysis identifies patterns and themes in the data, research findings present insider views on an observed problem, and techniques are selected in so far as they fit the problem being investigated (Parkhe, 1993).

#### 4.5 The case study approach

This research uses a single case study in the sense that one university has been selected for the study. In-depth interviews were conducted with seventeen academics and six institutional managers. Each of these participants might be considered as a case on his or her own within the single case design; attempts have been made to understand each participant's perception of the reality of policy implementation.

Yin (2003) has argued that case study is an appropriate research strategy under certain conditions, namely, when contemporary events are to be studied, when the research will benefit from the use of techniques such as direct observation and interviews with persons engaged in the event, and when the research questions are best addressed through the examination of multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 2003).

Other scholars have identified additional conditions favouring the use of the case study approach. Eisenhardt (1989) has argued for the use of case study when the research seeks to understand the dynamics present within individual settings. Others have insisted that case study enables in-depth study, allowing for large amounts of information to be generated from multiple sources of evidence, and that such in-depth study enables deeper clarification of the research problem for readers through the presentation of 'thick description' (Tellis, 1997).

It is clear that case study offers researchers what other strategies such as survey research and experimental designs do not – the opportunity to study events or phenomena in the moment or as they unfold, at close proximity, and from the perspective of those whose behaviour is being studied.

Finally, it has been argued that case study is the better research strategy when accounting for the context is essential to unraveling a problem. In this regard, the following statement by Yin (2003), motivating for case study as a means of linking context and problem, is particularly pertinent:

*A case study is an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident (2003: 13).*



In the case of this research, the context and research problem are critically linked in the sense that the problem can only be understood to the extent that the researcher provides an explanation for its roots in a specific context. Hence, the behaviour of academics around policy implementation in this case is mediated by various structural and contextual conditions created by, amongst other things, this university's historical status, its future trajectory, and its ongoing engagement with the post-apartheid state's agenda for transforming higher education in South Africa.

While UWC's management has invested in a vision of a future which demands that the university shed its past identity (and to this end has adopted the slogan *'From HBU to Excellence'*), many academics identify with the components of UWC's mission which celebrate service to the historically disadvantaged – the students and the community. At times, these two views of the university's present and future collide, producing tension and conflict around notions of service, of community, and of quality. Tension and contestation around views of quality and how it should be improved at UWC impact academics' responses to the implementation of post-apartheid quality policy. Thus, the particular institutional context is critically linked to my research problem, making the case study approach an appropriate choice for this study.

#### **4.5.1 Justification of single case design**

Yin (2003) has motivated for the use of single case designs by describing three specific conditions under which this choice can be justified. The first rationale is when the single case represents 'the critical case in testing a well-formulated theory.' Here Yin chooses to regard the single case as the equivalent of a single scientific experiment.

Secondly, he maintains that a single case study can be justified when the case is unique and there are no other commonly-occurring cases like it. Finally, he argues for the single case when it represents a situation which is not normally accessible to other researchers, which he names the 'revelatory' case (2003: 40-42). He does, however, add that these circumstances are not exclusive, and that further arguments could be made for adopting the single case design.

Yin has argued that multiple case design is better suited to the purposes of replication than single case design, in the sense that multiple case design, like multiple experiments, allows hypotheses to be confirmed (or contradicted) and accepted (or discarded).

However, such replication logic is associated more closely with positivism, and has been found to be less appropriate for interpretive research (Atkins and Sampson, 2002: 100-101). Researchers like Atkins and Sampson (2002) and Klein and Myers (1999) have motivated for case study research outside the confines of positivism and the demands of replication, and have attempted to link case study to an interpretive paradigm rather than to a neo-positivist one.

The rationale for this single case design is more consistent with an interpretive case study, in which cases are selected not on account of the kinds of results the researcher predicts will be found, but rather because of an interest in understanding a problem through intense observation of the phenomena being studied. Eysenck (1976) has argued for single case design in the following way:

*Sometimes we simply have to keep our eyes open and look carefully at individual cases – not in the hope of proving anything, but rather in the hope of learning something (1976: 9).*

The selection of this particular design arises out of Yin's (2003) prescription that single cases should be unique, extreme or revelatory, and is based on the conjecture that UWC represents a truly unusual case, in terms of its characterisation as a higher education institution in transition.

I have chosen to study a historically disadvantaged university in transition as it attempts to transform itself, and its perceptions of itself, from an institution in which quality was compromised by years of deliberate under-resourcing and neglect by the apartheid state. This transformation process has been fraught with ambiguities and tensions, related firstly to the university's efforts to 'shed its label of historical blackness' while continuing to serve a black student body, and secondly to attempts to engage constructively yet critically with the post-apartheid state while remaining mindful of its previous role as a vigorous opponent of state intervention.

A further rationale for selecting a single case design is its potential to best achieve the objective of the study, namely, to uncover and examine the greatest possible range and variety of academics' views, behaviours and responses to the implementation of quality policy. My research will probably show a wide range of views amongst academics of what quality is, of the purpose of higher education, and what their own role in a university ought to be.

Flyvbjerg (2006) introduced the concept of maximum variation to guide the selection of smaller numbers of cases. He suggested that the careful selection of three or four cases which appear very different on one dimension, such as organisation or location, could aid the collection of the greatest possible quantity and variety of information.

Flyvbjerg (2006) intended this principle to be applied to multiple case selection, but I would argue that a single case could contain elements of maximum variation when significant differences on a number of dimensions can safely be assumed to exist across multiple respondents. I expect to find a significant range of beliefs and behaviours with regard to quality and policy implementation amongst academics at the university under study - as wide a range in fact as one would expect to find amongst academics at any other institution in the world.

Academics at UWC come from all over the country and from all over the world. Some have been here for a very long time, and others for only a short while; many have been in a university environment for more than three decades while some have only started to build experience in higher education.

Academics from various disciplines in humanities, natural sciences, health sciences, economics, law, dentistry and education are gathered here, and it is fair to assume that maximum variation must exist amongst such a diverse population at UWC, as at any other higher education institution.

A final rationale for adopting a single case is that this design allows for depth of focus, and will therefore facilitate meaningful learning about the problem being investigated. Dissertation research has its own limits and boundaries – including those of time and resources – and I believe that a multiple case design would have fewer gains than a single case design; more would be sacrificed in terms of depth of investigation if more sites were included in the research design.

Babbie and Mouton (2001) have motivated for prolonged engagement as a way of achieving credibility, suggesting that researchers should stay in the field until data saturation occurs. I believe that to do justice to the site and achieve credible findings, a large amount of data needs to be collected from a wide range of people; this will ensure that the research generates a sense of the variety of the responses and perceptions.

Doing two cases would reduce the possibility of prolonged engagement in any one site, thereby spreading the research too thin and reducing the thickness of the case description.

#### **4.5.2 Issues of validity**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) developed the concept of 'trustworthiness' for qualitative research, to encompass credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability - concepts that roughly substitute for internal and external validity, reliability and objectivity. They argued that:

*The basic issue in relation to trustworthiness is simple: How can an inquirer persuade his or her audiences (including self) that the findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to, worth taking account of? (1985: 290)*

The literature on case study research has focused on a number of threats to the trustworthiness of this form of research and the problem of generalisation has received particular attention. Many have discussed the difficulty associated with generalising from a case or cases to an entire population, while others have argued that there is little point to doing research if the findings cannot be widely generalised. It has been mooted that single case study designs in particular have even less potential for generalisability beyond the particular case.

One response to these criticisms of case study findings has been to emphasise the importance of studying cases simply for their value as individual cases, without expecting the findings to shed light on any other cases or situations. In this view, generalisability is not a relevant issue. Stake (1994) has identified three different types of cases, arguing that *intrinsic* case designs are of this nature, in which a case is studied simply to understand a particular situation, as opposed to *instrumental* case designs where generalisability is an aim; in this a case is studied in order to understand a general issue which is likely to be manifested in other cases.

Other responses have been to redefine the notion of generalisability in a way which challenges the notion's embeddedness in statistical design and quantitative research. Theorists such as Yin (2003) and Smaling (2003) have formulated interesting alternative notions of generalisation, more appropriate to qualitative research design.

Analytical generalisation (Yin, 2003) proposes the idea of generalisation to theory rather than to other cases. It stresses the importance of early theory identification and development during the research design process. Such prior theory, when supported by the findings from specific cases, then becomes the means of generalisation, providing the lens through which new cases can be examined. In Yin's view, replication of findings across multiple cases is an essential element of analytical generalisation, presenting the means through which theoretical propositions can be tested and then either confirmed or contradicted by evidence from more than one case. He has argued further that the potential for replication makes multiple case designs stronger than single case designs since findings can then test propositions and generate theory across cases.

It can be argued, however, that replication logic, when strictly applied, shifts the focus of analysis away from generalising to theory to a form of generalisation to other cases, so that the process begins to resemble traditional cross-case generalisation within a positivist paradigm.

Smaling (2003) offers an alternative notion, that of analogical generalisation, which is less embedded in a positivist paradigm and involves identifying dimensions of the studied case which could 'ring true' across other cases. In this view, case study research should be so documented and described as to allow the reader to identify similarities and differences between the studied case and other cases. Thus cases are not selected because they are representative of the population, but rather for the possibility that the findings will 'ring true' for other cases.

From the above discussion it is clear that the researcher's view of the relationship between theory and case study data will determine the appropriate form of generalisation of the findings. In this research, I have described the theory of the Evaluative State as the vehicle through which generalisation will occur. It is intended that this theory will guide the research design and the data collection, allowing the findings which emerge to reflect back on the initial theory, its propositions and assumptions.

It is also intended that the description of the case study, including its design features and findings, will facilitate analogical generalisation in the sense that readers should be able to identify similarities and differences between UWC and other higher education institutions with which they are familiar, thus rendering the findings and theory globally meaningful.

Moving beyond issues of external validity, Kvale (1995) introduced the idea of quality craftsmanship to describe ways of checking throughout the research to ensure the internal validity of a study. He defines (1995) validity as the extent to which the study investigates the phenomena intended, and argues that validity goes beyond the issue of methods to include the ethical integrity of the researcher and the quality of the craftsmanship of the investigation.

Kvale (1995) further identifies tactics for continuously checking the credibility and reliability of research findings as they emerge. Amongst these are:

*...checking for 'researcher effects, triangulating, weighing the evidence, checking the meaning of outliers, using extreme cases, following up surprises, looking for negative evidence, making if-then tests, ruling out spurious relations, replicating a finding, checking out rival explanations and getting feedback from informants (1995: 6).*

Kvale's verification tactics were particularly useful as a checklist for internal validity for this study, and further discussion below will elaborate, where appropriate, on the use of some of these techniques.

## **4.6 Data collection**

### **4.6.1 The unit of analysis**

The primary unit of analysis for this study is drawn from academics at UWC, and the research will examine the impact of quality policy implementation from the perspective of their lived experiences. The unit of analysis is a group of people rather than an individual, and institutional managers have been identified as a critical sub-unit of analysis.

Yin (2003) has suggested that when a case has more than one unit of analysis it should to be deemed an embedded case study rather than a holistic one, which has a single unit of analysis.

The rationale behind specifying a second unit of analysis, or more precisely, a sub-unit, involves broadening the scope of the investigation in order to elicit a deeper understanding of the case under study.

Identifying a second unit of analysis focuses the research on the critical role of institutional managers in creating the conditions and circumstances, or the context, within which policy implementation occurs.

An embedded design extends the inquiry to include an examination of additional elements, and focusing on a sub-unit (institutional managers) alongside a primary unit of analysis (academics) provides an opportunity for broader analysis and for deeper insight into the case, its context and the research problem (Yin, 2003: 46).

#### **4.6.2 Data collection techniques**

While agreeing that the differences between qualitative and quantitative paradigms exist at the level of epistemological and ontological assumptions about research, theorists have differed on whether the techniques for collecting, coding and analysing the data should be associated with the research approach or whether they should be regarded as neutral and value-free.

Bryman (1984) has argued for the separation of a consideration of techniques or methods from paradigmatic choices about research approaches. His argument differs from those of many other writers who have separated out and categorised techniques and data collection methods strictly according to specific research paradigms.

For Bryman (1984), techniques are neutral to the extent that interviews, document analysis, surveys and participant observation can serve quantitative research equally as well as they do qualitative research. The only proviso governing the choice of technique should be its fit with the research question. The latter view is based largely on Trow's earlier conviction that 'the problem under investigation properly dictates the methods of investigation' (Trow, 1957, quoted in Bryman, 1984).

The selection of data collection techniques for this study has been informed by the above discussion on the relationship between paradigm and methods, and techniques have been selected according to a sense of how they fit the research questions which focus on academics' perceptions of the impact of change in higher education on their working lives. Further, it was decided that techniques such as interviewing and observation were more appropriate for qualitative research attempting to explain the complexity of human behaviour and uncover the meanings of human action.

Data collection techniques for this study are interviewing, document analysis and observation. Table 4.1 below elaborates on these.

**Table 4.1**

**Data collection techniques for this study**

1. Academics and university managers were interviewed.
2. Policy documents relevant to the South African higher education system in the post-apartheid era were analysed, with a focus on those relating to quality assurance and state steering in the context of the transformation of higher education.
3. The university's policy documents in relation to quality assurance and with regard to its mission and vision for transformation were examined.
4. Observations were conducted during internal academic review processes and during external audit.

Semi-structured individual interviews which allowed the participants to speak freely were planned, and a set of guiding questions were formulated to provide general direction for the conversations and to secure the kind of information sought. Two different types of interviews were conducted, with different guiding questions and areas of focus.

Interview Type A: For academics

Interview Type B: For managers at the university



The interviews were conducted to obtain information from academics and university managers about their opinions and beliefs regarding quality in education, the source of their beliefs, their notions about the relationship between the state and higher education, and their impressions of how conflicting opinions impact on quality evaluation.

Kvale (1995) has proposed seven stages in the research process for interview investigations: thematising or theorising the study, designing the sample and instrument, interviewing, transcribing, analysing, verifying and reporting.

This study followed a similar interview investigation process, and the following section will discuss some of the limitations and checking procedures within this process.

#### **4.6.3 Sample selection**

There were two distinct phases in the interviewing process. Interviewing began in April 2007, and fourteen people were interviewed between April and August 2007. Due to pressure of work, I only returned to interviewing in June 2008, conducting eight more interviews during this second phase. The focus in this phase was on interviewing managers at the university, five of them being interviewed during June 2008. Three more academics were also interviewed during the second phase.

An interesting feature of the two phases was that the 2007 interviews were completed before UWC experienced its first external audit by the Higher Education Quality Committee. Very few academics were involved in preparation of the self-evaluation report for this audit, but many linked the audit to more intense demands around record-keeping and increased administration associated with teaching and assessment. I was able to engage academics in interviews around their perceptions of potential audit outcomes and on their emotional and behavioural responses to pre-audit demands.

The audit took place during September 2007 and on my return to the field in June 2008 I found that no written feedback on the external audit had yet been received from the HEQC, although some verbal feedback was given to senior managers on the last day of the September 2007 audit. This allowed me to talk with managers during June 2008 about their expectations of the audit outcomes.

The interesting aspect of the timing of the two phases of interviewing was that the first phase captured academics' perceptions and expectations of the audit experience and its outcome. The second phase, while being retrospective to the audit, captured managers' perceptions of what the possible outcomes would be for UWC, after having gone through the audit process and having received some verbal feedback, but no official report, from the audit panel.

#### **4.6.4 The sample and triangulation of perspectives**

It was my initial intention that the sample should represent the diversity of academic staff at UWC. To this end, I wanted the sample to balance gender, age and years of employment at the university. It was not my intention to have disciplinary representation, but I did intend to interview academics from various faculties. I decided to first invite respondents from the academic community; from that initial sample I would decide on the next stage of selection.

Regarding access, permission was first sought and received from the Registrar of the university, this being the established procedure when conducting research at UWC. Then an e-mail was sent to all academic staff on the server list in April 2007, calling for volunteers to be interviewed on the topic of the 'implementation of quality policies in universities and the effect of these on the learning and working environment' - I quote from the original e-mail.

Academics from five faculties responded – nine from the Community and Health Sciences faculty (hereafter referred to as CHS), eight from the Faculty of Natural Science (hereafter referred to as Science), seven from the Economic and Management Sciences faculty (hereafter referred to as EMS) and three each from the Education and Arts faculties.

The group of academics eventually interviewed was predominantly made up of people who had volunteered for the study in response to my initial e-mail request for participants. It is fair to assume that these respondents had a particular interest in the subject. E-mail responses confirming their participation contained expressions of interest such as:

- *It's an excellent topic for a PhD, if I may say so. Good timing too.*
- *Good idea!*
- *I will participate with pleasure.*
- *In one sentence, it means more paperwork and hassle imposed on us researchers!*

- *I would love to talk to you because I do have some serious questions about it.*
- *I must warn you that I have some very critical views about the unprofessional way we are being treated here.*
- *We are particularly 'hit' by quality assurance audits so you might find our faculty particularly interesting.*

These responses alerted me to the possibility of the research findings being skewed as a result of participants sharing a particular view of quality policy implementation. As a cautionary measure, I interviewed just five of the above group, the ones who were available at the time of interviewing, and then six more who had volunteered but had expressed no opinion about the topic in their e-mail responses. One of the respondents in this latter group had commented:

*I'd like to participate but I may not be aware of these 'quality policies', and hence I may not have any views about them.*

The rest of the academic sample was established through the use of the snowballing technique. I asked academics from the CHS and Science faculties who came from the first group to suggest other academics in their faculties whom I could interview and who thought differently about quality policy implementation to the way they did.

Through using the snowballing technique in this way and consciously including a diversity of perspectives in the sample, some measure of triangulation of academics' views about the topic was achieved. Arksey and Knight (1999) have suggested that triangulation involves obtaining data from a wide range of different and multiple sources; they propose the following with regard to achieving a sample reflecting a diversity of opinions:

*Rather than just gather data from one particular group with an interest in the study, you could seek out the views of several sets of stakeholders and, in that way, introduce a comparative aspect (1999: 21).*

The relationship between the sample and the population was not designed to be a representative one, so in that sense the sample was not required to mirror differences in the population with regard to age, years of academic service, gender, disciplinary background, or type of employment contract.

However, the strategy of selection was aimed at achieving a relevant range of people in relation to the entire population at UWC in order to secure sufficient variation in the data - hence the attempt to include people who were known to have different opinions about and approaches to quality policy implementation.

At one point during the interviewing, I decided to focus my attention on the CHS and Science faculties because preliminary findings suggested that these two faculties had taken different approaches to quality implementation, compared both to each other and to the other faculties where academics had been interviewed, indicating that the experiences of academics in these two faculties were likely to reflect different approaches to quality policy implementation.

The other three faculties, Arts, Economic and Management Sciences, and Education, were not as marked by difference as the CHS and Science faculties appeared to be during this phase. Nevertheless, I found that, taken together, all the academics interviewed for the study reflected a sufficiently wide range of perceptions and behaviours with regard to quality and policy implementation in the university.

To summarise the academic interviewees: seventeen academics were interviewed, eleven of whom were female and six male. There was a wide variety in their years of employment at UWC. Three had been there for fewer than five years, most had been employed for more than ten years, while four had served for more than twenty-five years.

The fact that the majority of academics interviewed had spent ten or more years at UWC could be viewed as either a strength or a limitation of the sample. The advantage was that lengthy employment at one university could offer the benefit of insight into the impact of higher education change over time on the institution, while the weakness was that time often lent bias to people's views. In other words, long-serving academics might have become accustomed to a particular view of what constituted academic work and would be more likely to resent new demands, framing them perhaps too readily as an imposition and a distraction from performing their core activities well. The potential for long service to become either an advantage or a hindrance will be examined and accounted for when explaining the findings.

In terms of the interviews with managers, these were conducted with three members of the university's senior executive, one of whom had volunteered for the study, while I approached the other two directly with requests for an interview. Two senior managers in the quality and academic planning divisions of the university were also approached and agreed to be interviewed. The executive members were chosen because of their links with the university's academic project, while the two other managers were natural choices since they occupied senior positions in the quality assurance components of the university's work.

#### **4.7 Data analysis**

Interviews were transcribed as precisely as possible and then computer software, Atlas-ti, was used for coding and analysis. Seale (2006) has suggested that the activity of coding involves placing like with like, thereby allowing the researcher to identify patterns of similarity in the data. Coding is a serious activity, since decisions taken at this stage have consequences for the quality of data analysis (2006: 306).

I designed an interview protocol structured to elicit data about interviewees' views on quality, on quality assurance processes in the university, on the purpose of a university education, on the role of academics in universities, on how conditions in the university had changed in the last ten years, on the role of the relationship between the state and universities, and on their impressions of the HEQC Audit for which the university was preparing at the time of the research.

My first two interviews were conducted on a pilot basis. I approached the early interviews with a sense of testing whether the questions I was asking would elicit the data I needed to address the research questions of my study. For this reason, from my list of volunteers, I approached two people whom I knew well and whom I knew would not object to a second interview, if this were required. The pilot interviews were a tremendous learning experience.

By analysing my questioning style and interviewee responses with the help of my supervisor, I was able to identify my tendency to lead interviewees to answers I was hoping for, my habit of referring too often to my own experience at the university, and a tendency to pass subtle judgments on interviewees' responses.

Fortunately, the experience of piloting gave me the chance to correct these habits of questioning which otherwise might have led to validity compromises through the influence of personal bias, based on my years of experience at UWC.

I recorded interviews and transcribed many of them myself, but also employed three people to do the transcribing for me. In the interests of protecting the identity of those interviewed and ensuring confidentiality of information, I employed people who had no links with UWC or with higher education, except for the fact that they had obtained undergraduate degrees at universities other than UWC.

I designed a protocol for the transcribing process, indicating the symbols and abbreviations I wanted them to use, for example, to indicate that a section of the interview was inaudible, that the transcriber was unsure of what he or she had heard, or to indicate a pause, and its length, in the conversation. Analysing the transcriptions of the pilot interviews revealed the complexities of punctuation - that the act of deciding where a comma, a colon, a new sentence or a new paragraph were to be inserted was in itself an act of data analysis which had an impact on the meaning of the words spoken. The transcribers were therefore instructed that I would insert punctuation into the text after reading and then listening to the transcribed interviews.

The transcribed interviews were coded using Atlas-ti software, which enabled me to group responses into cognate codes. These codes would form the basis of the categories finally constructed, through merging or linking codes into categories, or constructing categories out of groups of codes. The first themes I designed emerged from the literature, from my own experience in the university and from my initial hypotheses. These initial themes changed a number of times. An exercise I found useful was to list every code and category on a separate piece of paper and then to shuffle them around, physically grouping them together, moving them from one group to another, ranking them in order of importance to the research, and grouping them in terms of similarities and differences. After a variety of permutations, I eventually reached a thematic construction which reflected what I imagined I was seeing in the data.

#### 4.8. Peer debriefing

A useful tool in the data analysis process was the interaction I had with an independent researcher, a critical friend, Sandy, who had done a substantial amount of research into universities and policy implementation, both nationally and in the Western Cape. We met a few times while I was conducting interviews - I was engaged in data analysis during interviewing and data transcription - and we also met during my process of grouping and categorising the data. I discussed my puzzlement over the data and the meanings I attributed to it, and she prompted my analysis by asking useful questions such as:

- Are the coding categories answering the research questions?
- How do you explain the contradictions you say you are finding in respondent's discourse?
- Are the things you expected not coming up?
- How would you explain the differences in views between the leadership and the academics? What does each group care about?
- What kinds of tensions are emerging? Why do academics feel burdened and frustrated?
- What are the dangers and benefits to having diverse notions of quality in this university?
- What has astounded and surprised you?

The notes of these discussions served as a useful record of my ongoing process of reflection and data analysis and, given my immersion in the site, the role of the critical friend in reflecting back on my ongoing interpretation of the data contributed towards ensuring the trustworthiness of the data.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) defined peer debriefing in the following way:

*It is a process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytical session and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer's mind (1985: 308).*

The usefulness for my research was that peer debriefing allowed me the opportunity to test and defend my analysis of the data, through establishing whether Sandy regarded it as a reasonable explanation of the views and behaviours of the participants.

My views of higher education and the behaviours of academics and leadership had been shaped by my experience of working at UWC. The experiences shared by Sandy about her research into the behaviour of academics and leaders at other South African universities broadened my perception and enriched my reflections about the relevance of the findings of this particular case. Smaling (2003) introduced the concept of analogical generalisation to refer to the usefulness of case study research which allows readers to identify similarities and differences between the case being studied and other cases. The discussions with Sandy gave me the opportunity to identify features of the analysis of behaviours, views and responses of leaders and academics at UWC which both resembled and differed from Sandy's research findings derived from her study of other South African universities.

The immediate outcome of the process of inductive analysis of the data is reflected in the three tables of codes, themes and categories, in the Appendix to this study. The tables are presented, broadly, in relation to the research question and the research propositions of the study.

#### **4.9 Limitations of the study**

It was decided to opt for depth rather than breadth of information in interviewing. I spent between one and two hours with each interviewee, covering the same ground through the use of a specific interview guide; at the same time, I allowed for flexibility, probing to clarify the intentions behind the words used by the interviewees. The questions were mainly open-ended, but with two closed questions, one about the time interviewees had been at UWC, the other about details of the quality assurance work they were involved in. One question was both open and closed, in the sense that it asked interviewees to choose from a set of definitions of quality the ones which resonated most with their thinking and then to explain their choice.

Dissertation research has to set clear time and sample boundaries if it is to be completed within a reasonable period. It is accepted that setting such boundaries may result in an incomplete or even biased view of the impact of a quality regime on academic staff.



Depth of information was achieved through focusing the interviewing on two faculties and by describing in detail the implementation processes followed in each.

This research will not claim that its findings about academics' views and behaviours are representative of the views and responses of the academic population in South African universities as a whole. At most, the research findings will either confirm or contradict the propositions formulated at the start of this study. In the end I will be able to present findings which address the impact of quality regimes of the Evaluative State on academic practice in one university. Through thick description, readers will be encouraged to identify similarities and differences between the realities of quality policy implementation in UWC and other universities.

#### **4. 10 Chapter summary**

This chapter provided a justification for selecting case study method as a research strategy, and for the decision to use single case design for the investigation. The sample design and data collection methods were described and data coding and analysis procedures were discussed. Design limitations were addressed through the identification of appropriate strategies to promote internal and external validity, credibility and trustworthiness.

In conclusion, the chapter identified limitations mainly connected with single case design, and with threats to validity associated with the effects of research proximity. The discussion also described threats to external validity and proposed alternative notions of conceptualising generalisability. Further, it attempted to demonstrate that the severity of these threats can be reduced through applying checking procedures constantly during the investigation, to achieve a form of validity associated with 'quality craftsmanship'.

Chapters 5 and 6 provide a description and interpretation of the data, achieved through the analysis according to the themes and categories presented in the attached Appendix.

Chapter 5 presents data associated with academics' and institutional managers' views of quality, while Chapter 6 gives data largely related to the responses and behaviours of academics with regard to the implementation of quality assurance policies.