

## CHAPTER SIX

### Reporting on the Findings of the research

#### **How do competing conceptions of quality relate to academics' attitudes towards the implementation of quality assurance policy and processes?**

##### **6.1 Introduction**

This chapter will explore academics' approaches and responses towards the implementation of quality assurance policy and processes at UWC and will link these to their views of quality and their understandings of how quality ought to be improved. In so doing, it will explore and seek to understand the breadth of their responses to implementing quality assurance measures, as they range from compliance to resistance. The analysis will also seek to explain ambivalence in the academics' responses, manifested in individual discourses about quality assurance, often shifting between seemingly contradictory positions and approaches.

This exploration will shed light on the tensions and contradictions within universities as they respond to national demands and pressures, and will locate the behaviour and actions of university managers within the interplay between conflicting imperatives – those of the state and those of other constituencies it must serve.

This section will also highlight the ways in which power shapes action, and in so doing shapes notions of quality and how it ought to be improved. In one sense, the state wields power to move the higher education system along its intended trajectory. It does this by making demands on institutions to act and respond in particular ways, using financial rewards and penalties to achieve the intended transitions and transformations. In another sense, individual academics wield significant power in shaping the institutional response to quality demands, by either facilitating the response required or acting to hinder the implementation of proposed strategies through applying resistance techniques.

The chapter will continue to explore the phenomenon of change, shedding light on universities in transition, by focusing attention on the historically disadvantaged institution or HBU and its propensity for change or willingness to transform in response to demands from the state.

It will also examine the contradictory impulses within such an institution, which at times are able to jettison change efforts and slow down transition.

An attempt will be made to create a framework for understanding academics' responses, one that takes account of the contextual factors, both internal and external, as well as current and historical, which condition academics' responses to the implementation of quality assurance measures. The analysis will further theorise the actions and behaviour of university managers in a way that acknowledges the power of the state to shape university responses to its demands.

## **6.2 Approaching responses to quality assurance demands**

During the long interviews, both academics and university managers were asked to address this chapter's focal question, *What changes in the university environment have you experienced over the past five years or so that have impacted your work most?* With few exceptions, the responses saw the introduction of quality assurance measures at UWC as embodying a set of significant interventions, destined to shape the university's post-apartheid existence and alter the daily experiences of university work for both academics and managers.

Other related questions delved into interviewees' understanding of the reasons for an increase in quality assurance activity at UWC and attempted to characterise individual responses, approaches and behaviours towards the implementation of these policies and measures. An attempt was also made to elicit from interviewees a sense of the breadth and full range of responses amongst academics to the requirements and demands of quality assurance implementation.

The data revealed a range of responses, including minimal compliance, non-compliance, various forms of resistance, total compliance, and instances of manipulative compliance. The analysis will identify a range of factors that determine academics' responses; these include institutionally-specific contextual factors, such as the nature of the university's student intake and the academics' understanding of the institution's history and mission.

Critical to framing academics' responses are factors such as their conceptualisation of quality, their educational ideology (Trowler, 2001), their view of the purpose of a university education, as well as their political stance towards the post-apartheid state and its identification of priorities for higher education.

The study focused on that aspect of higher education change that was concerned with quality and quality assurance. The data will inform an understanding of academics' responses to the implementation of internal quality assurance measures, as well as offering some account of responses to a national quality audit.

### **6.3. UWC's quality assurance system**

The quality assurance system referred to in this research involves all the internal institutional interventions designed to assure quality, including those of quality policy, quality measures and mechanisms, and the functions of quality committees. In the main, academics and managers focused their discussion on the quality assurance of the academic activities associated with teaching, while references were made to quality assurance associated with research output. Quality assurance of teaching included activities and measures related to the requirements of three university policies – the teaching and learning policy, the assessment policy, and the moderation policy. The first two policies were designed and written by the university's Academic Planning Unit, while the third was prepared by the university's Quality Manager. In addition, many references were made to the work of quality committees, such as the academic planning committees of faculties and of Senate, and also to the higher degree/postgraduate committees of faculties and Senate.

Academics focused their attention in discussion on those quality assurance initiatives and interventions which had the most significant impact on their work. In their view, major change had been wrought by, firstly, the demand that all curricula in the university be modularised and designed around programmes, as decreed by the teaching and learning policy, and secondly that curriculum planning, and hence teaching, proceed within an outcomes-based format, as directed by both the assessment policy and the teaching and learning policy.

Thirdly, the moderation policy required that all final-year courses, named 'exit level modules', be moderated, in accordance with the new quality assurance policy framework, by external academic experts, and that the findings and views of the external peers about the quality of both student performance and the curriculum be presented to the relevant faculty and to the Senate.

Much discussion ensued in interviews around the new technical mechanisms introduced to enable the recording functions of the quality assurance framework, namely the new system for recording student marks, the Marks Administration System. And finally, regarding those aspects of quality which impacted academic work the most, academics identified the increased focus on throughput, both as a teaching output imperative and as an inescapable pressure on them to produce research in accredited journals, that is, to increase research output, as twin pressures that were felt most keenly.

Analysis of the data will proceed by focusing on those aspects of the quality assurance policy demands which represented the most significant impact on the daily lives of the university's academics. Quality assurance requirements and initiatives around modularisation, outcomes-based education and the curriculum alignment demanded by these initiatives will be discussed, as will new demands created by the university's moderation policy and the considerably greater focus on the achievement of output indicators. Other incidental quality assurance matters and interventions, including the functioning of various quality assurance committees designed to regulate implementation, will be discussed in an emergent fashion.

The main focus of this section will be on accounting for three broad categories of academics' responses to change, namely *non-compliance*, *surface compliance* and *full compliance*.

A further focus will be on examining academics' orientation towards implementation, concentrating on data which suggest that academics find quality assurance demands burdensome and frustrating; the data reveal that the feeling of being unnecessarily burdened applies to all dimensions of academic responses, including those who refuse to comply, those who feign compliance, and those who comply completely.

## **6.4. Explaining non-compliance**

### **6.4.1. Refusal**

Anderson (2008) defines refusal as a range of responses, including forgetting, outright refusal to comply, protest, delaying, and avoidance through ignoring requests and requirements. This study found that academics' responses reflected some elements of Anderson's (2008) typology of resistance strategies. I will attempt to explain non-compliance by reference to the complex and often overwhelming requirements of quality assurance processes.

Igor, a Science professor at UWC, introduced the concept of non-compliance as refusal, when he described his head of department's behaviour as 'abrogating his duties' through non-provision of required information. The context referred to was related to new demands arising out of the university's moderation policy, which, amongst other things, required departmental heads to access information from academics in their departments regarding external moderation reports for final-year modules. Heads of departments were required to summarise the content of moderator reports in an integrated report on moderation findings. These reports were then sent to a senior academic given the responsibility of preparing a composite faculty report on moderation to be submitted to the university's Senate Academic Planning Committee for reporting purposes. This system of compiling moderation information was complex and tedious, and depended on the cooperation of academics at various levels. The reporting structure was convoluted, starting with the receipt of the externals' comments and concluding with the tabling of these at the highest internal governance structure, the Senate.

Igor, who had been employed at UWC for 36 years at the time of this research, describes the complex system of information gathering to generate these reports. Interestingly, his description came in response to my request that he elaborate on a comment he had made earlier about expecting academics to respond to 'unnecessary things':

*Question: You said there are lots of unnecessary things required...*

*Yes, there is. The head of department has to send in information ... and he gets told to provide the information for the next day... He needs staff members to give him the information from each individual examiner and they have also got to do it within six hours. But people have other things to do.*

*They can't come at the last minute as so often is the case, and require a huge amount of information and at the end of the day nothing happens to that information... And it is very frustrating for the head of department, because he can't do his job unless we do ours. And so there is a knock-on effect, and if one or two staff say, 'Listen, I have got lectures the whole morning. I have a practical this afternoon. I can't get you the information. Sorry,' then what does the head of department do? People may think he is abrogating his duties and it is not the case.*

Igor provides data on the frustration felt by departmental heads and academics alike, who both appear to be refusing to comply, by not providing the information requested to the relevant parties by the set deadlines. He also hints at the frustration felt by academics who are expected to provide information and reports which appear to serve no discernable purpose, and he labels these requirements as burdensome and 'unnecessary'.

Louise, also a Science professor, commented on refusal or non-compliance, in response to my question:

*Question: What would you say makes it easy or difficult to achieve quality here?*

*I think personalities, mostly, because people are really good at understanding policy... they just choose not to implement or pay attention. For example, they don't pay attention to your e-mails when you ask for things... I think it's got to do with them not being able to always access the information from their subordinates... The forms that have to be completed by the departmental chairperson and the external examiners' report forms, sometimes they don't get these back, you see. So, instead of telling us that for these modules they didn't get it back, they panic. Prof K, for example ... panics and then he does nothing. So it's not that he doesn't want to comply. He is overwhelmed.*

Louise and Igor's comments shed some light on the complexity of refusal as a form of non-compliance.

In Igor's case, some academics' possibly real refusal to comply with the moderation requirements resulted in advertent refusal by their head of department, who was then compelled, by the absence of information, to ignore the quality assurance requests.

Louise ascribes the behaviour of Professor K to his being overwhelmed by the requirement to comply, in the face of non-cooperation of other academic staff members.

It is interesting to note the intersection of various elements of non-compliance, as described by Anderson (2008), in these examples. The non-compliant behaviour of academics, in the context of demands for information, reflects intersecting elements of outright refusal, the ignoring of requests, delaying, avoidance and protest, in a way that makes it difficult to distinguish one form of refusal from another.

Louise later introduced a discussion on the growth of managerialism and the decline of academic freedom into her interviews, arguing that some academics are digging in their heels and refusing to comply from a sense of outrage at these changes.

*Never have we been regulated, from what I can see, like this before. I remember... a speech that the previous Dean of Science gave on academic freedom...I remember what he said and I tend to think that there isn't such a thing any more ... because we've been regulated. How can we have freedom ... within a regulation framework? And there is more accountability. You are monitored, you are tracked, you are evaluated....and it has a huge impact on the way in which business is not usual any more ... for higher education because universities are accountable... It's clear that things are being governed much more strictly...I don't even think the Rectors have any real power any more.*

*Perhaps that's why they've adopted the whole system of managing universities like businesses... The shift from what we had before, from the sort of academic freedom we had to a managerial system ... that is a consequence of the regulations happening outside. They had to change the model by which they manage the institution. I think it doesn't gel well with academics and some of them are still refusing to comply. They are going to retire refusing to follow the new rules. I'm sorry but we have to ... or we have to leave... I don't think that we're going to get away from it.*

Louise links refusal to a decline in academic freedom, increased regulation and demands for accountability, and an attendant shift in institutional managerial approaches.

Her concluding statement suggests reluctant acceptance of the changes resulting from these shifts and also points to the inevitability of these changes, given the rise of state regulation and accountability.

#### 6.4.2. Resisting encroachment

One key finding of this study was that academics were consistent about vigorously defending the boundaries, as they defined them, of academic work. Theorists have suggested that academics have a distaste for tasks they see as falling outside the parameters of academic work and that they are '*likely to resist erosion of valued aspects of their work*' (Anderson, 2008: 252).

This study similarly found what appeared to be disdain for activities which did not fall within the clear boundaries of 'academic work', as defined by academics. These boundaries served to exclude, or treat with contempt, any tasks or activities that were broadly administrative in nature, or that were associated with mundane and often technical pursuits. I used the term 'encroachment' here – the academics persistently defended their academic turf, and resisted attempts by managers, colleagues and others, to 'encroach' on their boundaries. These boundaries appeared to possess dimensions of both time and space – universities were places where academics did certain kinds of work, including disciplinary work and other activities deemed appropriate in terms of the academics' conceptualisations of such boundaries.

Emma offers an explanation for resistance to change amongst academics in her faculty:

*I think the easy answer is that change is always hard for everybody and there will always be resistance to change. I think people in this faculty are incredibly overburdened and overworked. I don't think we have the luxury of time to spend on these things. If people choose to do research it is often in their specialist areas, not in education... So I think it has to do with resistance to change. ..People are resistant to do things that take time - administrative and technical tasks that take more time.*

Emma's explanation of non-change in her faculty serves as an account of academics resisting encroachment. In this case, she argues that academics choose to conduct research on their 'specialist' areas; hence expecting them to research their own teaching practice comes up against a defense against encroachment. The defense of academic turf seems closely associated with academics' attempts to jealously guard their time and resist wasting it on what is regarded as extraneous activity.



In this regard, Igor believes that academics' time should be spent on activities that belong within these clear academic boundaries:

*I think academic staff are here to lecture and to transfer knowledge over to students, to be involved with student affairs in so far as it relates to their courses, and then for research. We are expected to do research because if we need money to go overseas on conferences then it is our research outputs that count...And if we don't produce then we don't go. So there is a fine balance about spending one's time best. So therefore we don't need the unnecessary extra work – that's an imposition, and it is essentially not ... part of why I am here.*

An element of self-interest, as evidenced in Igor's reference to doing what is required to generate funds for going overseas, is sometimes observed in academics' decisions on how to carve out time and how to determine the boundaries of academic work. Profitability is a significant motive, and many academics inferred that their time was best spent engaged in activities that would earn them the most financial rewards, accolades and credits towards promotion and advancement.

#### **6.4.3. Non-compliance and awareness of opportunity costs**

Louise identifies the pressure on academics to generate research publications and produce successful postgraduate students as one of the profitability factors encouraging academics to think carefully about how they spend their time:

*I think it also has to do with workload ... It does compromise quality because they are so busy with their teaching. It's not the research that suffers, because that they do research in their own time, they must still deliver on their research. In ... the Science faculty, we doubled our research output since 2005. Something had to suffer because we certainly didn't get more staff. And ... maybe the teaching did suffer because in 2006 we had a large number of modules with lower than 50% pass rates. So we have to connect those things. And ... people ... ask, 'Where can I get the most credit for promotion? ... What am I going to put my time into? I'm going to publish and I'm going to present at conferences. I'm going to produce postgraduate students because certainly teaching is not working out well for me.' So that's what they do and that is where quality can suffer.*

Louise makes a tentative link between a decline in quality and the choice by academics to focus on aspects of academic work that are better rewarded, when she implies that a decrease in pass rates may have been related to an increase in research output.

Kackman and Wageman (1995) have written extensively on the opportunity costs associated with quality assurance efforts. Susan and others have identified costs associated with both emphasising research and the rewards that could accrue from it, exerting pressure on academics to publish or perish. They have suggested that the costs associated with these efforts could eventually impact the quality of teaching and other components of the university's core business.

The University of the Western Cape is attempting to position itself as a research-led institution, as part of its efforts to demonstrate that it is a place of exceptional quality. Further, the state has shifted to a performance funding framework for the provision of research funding. In the past, the university received block funding for research. Recently, UWC was warned that in future research, subsidy funding would be granted only for research output achieved. In the meantime, it has been granted research development funding, equivalent to the funding gap between what it should be earning through its research output and what it is earning. In the wake of the state's warning that it will soon withdraw research development funding, the university has embarked on a massive campaign to increase academics' research output through publication (in accredited formats) and graduating postgraduate students.

In the following quote Ruth, a departmental chairperson and Science professor, expresses the dilemma of being faced with too many demands at once, and particularly highlights the opportunity costs embedded in the new tasks associated with administering the quality assurance system:

*In some cases additional things are created and it's just uploaded as something extra that a person has to do ... You get to a point where you just cannot cope any more. ... They must also know that by moving some things down ... you get to a point where your plate is just too full to actually do justice, to do anything properly. And then you have to start ... selecting ... the most important things that I'm paid to do. Most probably as a lecturer you'll decide, I have to lecture, so I have to prepare, so those would be my important things that I will do first, and then I can start doing all the add-ons.*

Ruth hints at a phenomenon which was referred to by a number of other interviewees, namely the increase in administrative work that has resulted from an increase in quality assurance activities. This was described by some as management (suggested by Ruth's use of 'they') shifting new and even existing administrative responsibilities to academics. It is likely that what is being experienced is related to an increase in tasks associated with gathering and reporting quality information.

It is also possible that the additional burdens associated with increasing quality assurance practices and demands have simply been inserted into the traditional scope of academic work. Ruth suggests that passing on these burdens to academics as a requirement of their jobs engenders the need to prioritise academic work by focusing on those things worth attending to, while not doing justice to other, possibly equally important academic tasks.

#### **6.4.4. Non-compliance and mistrust**

The data suggests that refusal is one form of resistance to managerial demands of the quality assurance system. When one considers the functions and form of the quality assurance measures in place at this institution, it is clear that one thing these measures have in common is the emphasis on reporting.

According to Kenneth, *'everything has to be made explicit,'* and more importantly, everything has to be made public - in one way or another intense scrutiny is applied, often by non-academics as well, to aspects of academic work that were previously assumed to be the domain and responsibility only of the academics concerned and perhaps their disciplinary heads and Deans. In terms of moderation, past practice underscored a collegial relationship between external moderators and the academics whose courses were being scrutinised, and the outcome of moderation exercises was regarded as a largely private matter between the relevant parties.

Under the new arrangements, academics are required to report to academic heads, Deans, Vice Rectors, other academics and quality management staff on the professional deliberations between themselves and their peers, and to make public the recommendations and criticisms peers may offer. The same applies to quality measures such as course evaluations, previously a private matter between academics and their students. Academics in the past chose whether to heed any of the advice and reflections offered by their students. Now they are required to report on and provide evidence of the criticisms of students and account for the actions taken in the light of student feedback.

In the past, academics were entrusted with full responsibility for ensuring the quality of the academic project, but recent years have seen a shift to a form of quality assurance based on accountability and transparency and marked by mistrust of academics by institutional managers and the state.

What appears to be mistrust on the part of university managers, the state and its agencies about academics' ability to continue providing programmes of high standards, could also be read as doubt about the academics' willingness to behave in ways that will accelerate the pace of transformation of the higher education system.

This mistrust is reflected in demands for more and better record-keeping, for documentation of all aspects of academic work, to facilitate monitoring and surveillance of such work. Some academics have welcomed these changes as providing greater structure and regulation of their work, while others have bemoaned these changes.

Amy expresses a more positive view of new monitoring requirements:

*I think the quality assurance mechanisms in place have been good. They have ... kind of regulated things so it makes it less up to the ethos of particular departments or individuals. So that has been good. Things like course evaluations, for example, which have never really been mandatory or taken seriously. So you have some people in the department who would do it because they want to improve their practice but it was never mandated or never regulated but now I think it's far more part of practice.*

Amy suggests that mandating certain behaviours, like requiring academics to report and act on students' evaluations of the quality of teaching, has the effect of improving quality. Her view of the positive effects of quality assurance regulations resonates with Anderson's (2001) view that *quality audit can be good for you when it is done well* (2001: 1).

Harold suggests that the planning and record keeping requirements which accompany the introduction of quality assurance systems reflect an improvement on past practices:

*My own sense is that UWC would do no planning and no record keeping different from 10 years ago if the Department of Education did not require these things.*

*Question: Would that have been a good thing?*

*No, we were stumbling around in the dark then. I think management by ideology was the modus operandi when I got here - you were assumed to be on the team - but we didn't have systems. Even though the system now is not productive in terms of implementation, this has to be an institution that is accountable to who funds it, whether taxpayers or students - for providing education in a structured way. This was not the case in the past.*

Harold refers to UWC as 'stumbling around in the dark' in relation to the lack of systemised quality assurance measures, and suggests that demanding accountability results in improving quality. He argues further that in the past it was incorrectly assumed that UWC's academics, motivated by a belief in social justice, would always act in the students' best interests by providing a quality education.

Kenneth offers a more negative perception of the impact of quality assurance than that offered by Harold and Amy, suggesting that rising quality assurance demands have created new burdens associated with a focus on monitoring and surveillance:

*There has certainly been a huge burden of increased bureaucracy and paperwork. Everything that was implicit before has now got to be explicit - written down and typed up. I think that's the main change.*

Kenneth, Harold and Amy suggested, in various ways, that mistrust of academics' commitment to improving quality resulted in demands for accountability that mandated certain quality assurance practices related to planning, record-keeping and reporting on measures such as course evaluations. While Harold and Amy believe that the regulation of academics' behaviour in this way resulted in quality improvement, Kenneth believed that the major consequence was an increase in monitoring and surveillance, through the expectation that implicit efforts to improve quality be made explicit and open to scrutiny.

#### **6.4.5. Non-compliance and invoking professional boards**

I asked Harold, a professor in Economic and Management Sciences, to comment on what he saw as the range of academic responses to quality assurance requirements in his faculty:

*I don't know whether the quality assurance through the Committee for Higher Education is more important than the quality assurance through professional bodies in the way that a lot of people operate. When you talk about quality assurance to industrial psychology and accounting people, the CHE and the university system do not register on their radar schemes. What does register is the requirements of their professional boards. I don't know to what extent they're looking at the interface between those two. To the rest of us that is completely opaque, like a disciplinary secret. I've always asked ... 'Will the Board approve this?' They always say, 'The Board won't approve it.' I've said, 'Just show me the specs and I'll work through ... them.'*

Harold's interpretation that the refrain, '*The Board won't approve it,*' reflects a stubborn refusal to change, echoes Anderson's finding that some 'academics noted that the professional bodies accrediting their courses could be usefully invoked in a less confrontational form of refusal.'

In Harold's view, some departments sheltered behind the requirements of their professional boards, as a form of refusal to comply with new university quality assurance requirements. Interestingly, in other interviews, some of the key champions for change in line with the university's quality assurance requirements actually invoked the requirements of some professional boards to engender compliance in their faculties, so that one factor, namely the role of professional boards, could be harnessed to either aid or hinder effective implementation.

#### **6.5. Explaining surface compliance**

There seem to be at least two forms of surface compliance. One involves academics going through the motions of minimum compliance - having identified what is minimally required, they proceed to comply without any real engagement with the change required. An example of this was the HEQC's requirement that faculties create assessment committees to engage with issues around assessment.

Minimal compliance saw the creation of such committees without any real interest in engaging in pedagogical debates about the relative value of different assessment methodologies and strategies for student learning, and instead became a place where pass rates were reported and briefly discussed.

Amy describes the workings of the Faculty Assessment Committee as an exercise in minimal compliance, as follows:

*I think academics kind of comply. I don't think it's really taken seriously. There is an assessment committee and it's not really looking at deeper issues around the quality of assessment. It becomes ... just a structure dealing with marks, marks administration. There's seldom debate ... More recently there's been a debate around ... the use of MCQ questions, which came out of a review process in one of the other departments and out of that (name) organised a workshop on multiple choice assessment. But there's very little of that kind of debate and dialogue around deeper issues around assessment.*

Amy's interest in engaging in debate about assessment and teaching and learning contrasted with the attitudes of other academics, who were happy to attend assessment committee meetings, but had very little interest in discussing the relative benefits for teaching and learning of adopting one assessment strategy over another.

Hence the establishment of a faculty assessment committee became an exercise in minimal compliance, where faculties could demonstrate that they had put in place the quality assurance structures required, without expressing a commitment to improving practice through dialogue and debate.

The second form of surface compliance, slightly different in intent from the first, involves academics pretending to comply, but in fact engaging in a form of game-playing. An example of this is participation in the exercise in restructuring curricula around programmes, which were composed of outcomes-based, often cross-disciplinary, modules.

Game-playing with regard to modularisation requirements meant that academics did what was required without restructuring the curriculum in a meaningful way. They simply broke down their current curriculum into dividable parts, allocated credit units to these, called them modules and rephrased module topics into outcome statements.

Harold described this form of compliance with curriculum change in the following way:

*Management department people are compliant – they do not challenge the system. Their modus operandi is, this is the new way of doing business, and they do it. We had a debate about a 15-credit module for first year. I put forward a proposal ... and sent to the department a draft module descriptor for a new first-year module and we had a meeting of relevant people and it was going to happen. The question was what to put in the module descriptor. After an hour the thing was over. The feeling was, 'We'll do the details later – we're not fighting about policy issues if it's not getting in the way of what we do.' They're not interested in talking about the academic stuff.*

*I think a lot of academics don't care about it as long as someone doesn't peep over their shoulder and interfere with what they're doing in their courses or complain that graduates out of that module don't know this or not being able to do what they should be able to do as a reasonable expectation.*

Surface compliance through game-playing in the way described by Harold appears to have arisen out of a very pragmatic approach by academics to dealing with the many changes in education policy they were faced with.

Change-overload has been identified elsewhere as leading to surface compliance and game-playing. Harold suggests that, when confronted by diverse pressures for change, academics at UWC pick their fights, and choose not to debate or challenge interventions if they are able to implement them with little modification to the way they have always done things.

## **6.6. Explaining full compliance**

### **6.6.1 Performance funding driving compliance**

Many interviewees referred to student pass rates as being the driver of subsidy income and responded that they felt this pressure keenly, in the sense that it had become academics' responsibility to take whatever steps were necessary to encourage student success and improve performance against this efficiency indicator. There was a sense, moreover, in which academics felt aggrieved that the state had failed to make allowance, by enforcing a funding formula around these kinds of performance indicators, for institutions which accepted educationally disadvantaged students.

Thabo became passionate when expressing his disappointment at what he regarded as the state's failure to take account of the context of the HBUs:





*When I look at the national framework with respect to their expectations of higher education institutions, I find it quite appalling because I would have thought at least from (the Minister of Education) ... there would have been a far greater understanding of the differences between these different institutions in this country. So they've got a benchmark at 80% first-year passes. How can we possibly have the (HWIs and the HBUs) on the same benchmark? It's craziness and it shows an absolute lack of any kind of understanding of the reality of the struggle that they claim is our greatest triumph. It annoys me when they make generalised statements like higher education is suffering with 40%, 50% first-year drop-out rates. Given what is coming through to us they shouldn't be surprised at all. They should wonder at the numbers that we are actually getting through.*

Thabo, a senior manager at UWC, suggests that benchmarking student performance across the higher education sector is unrealistic.

Notwithstanding this appreciation of the impossible task presented by the state, UWC's managers continue to encourage academics to improve quality, in line with efficiency indicators, by increasing pass rates.

Lee expresses his irritation at the system of performance funding, and the focus on pass rates as indicators of quality:

*Of course there's also more and more pressure to pass students. I know that has affected some other departments, I don't think it's affected our department. Subsidy is now more linked to passes than to bodies, and if we're going to remain an engaged university that tries to uplift people, and I believe we should, then we cannot expect the same pass rates as universities that are much more selective in their intake. We'll certainly try, but it's hard to fill in the background.*

Again, Lee and others appeal to a sense of fairness, by arguing that the state should make some allowance for UWC's commitment to delivering on the goal of broadening participation, by being prepared to work with under-prepared students, instead of expecting it to perform at the same level as other universities which '*are more selective in their intake.*'

Many academics expressed their frustration at the quality costs incurred by institutions through subsidy-related throughput pressure, and I quote Carol who describes the negative impact of such pressure on quality:



*We want quality assignments, students don't have PCs at home, but students can't get computer bookings because the computer labs are full. Should the state not be giving us the funding? The funding is received as throughput. A major issue is, do we just work for throughput because then we can compromise quality, because 'I must pass my fourth years as funding in three years will be affected by that fourth-year pass rate.' So now you're pushing to pass them to get the funding, but that student is perhaps not the quality we should be pushing through.*

*State funding may be skewed and jeopardising quality. It's always on my mind that if I want to fail these students now then I have four students short for the Masters, so I let them redo the assignment, and help them here and there ...*

Carol suggests that performance funding encourages decision-making about teaching and learning that is less related to the pursuit of quality student graduates and more to the pursuit of financial rewards from the state. She also refers to the context of students' reality and wonders how high standards of quality can be expected from an institution which faces critical challenges, where achieving quality often hinges on the university providing basic needs, such as computer access, for its students.

In order to understand compliance at UWC, it is essential that one consider the impact of the application of performance indicators on a complex situation in which the institution is under pressure to be seen to be improving at many levels. This leaves academics, as mediators of student performance, little choice but to play the quality game and make the effort required, or at least be seen to make the effort, to facilitate the performance needed to sustain the institution.

Academics are under pressure to perform and to account for their behaviour in improving quality in the institution.

In the following quote, Louise described what she viewed as a new interest amongst Science academics in teaching and learning matters:

*I was asked to come last year to talk to a first-year Maths lecturer. He was concerned because students couldn't even use a calculator to add two fractions. Then as we investigated the matter, the Dean thought it was an ability issue. What it turned out to be*

*was that the student was not doing homework... For that lecturer it was making sure that people knew, like getting off his chest that, 'Hey, we do focus on the problems.' There is that kind of reaction coming up.*

Louise suggested that previously these academics had displayed little inclination to engage with these issues, but were suddenly determined that the Dean and senior faculty should bear witness to their efforts to address issues of student learning. Louise's comments suggest that academics, in engaging with teaching and learning problems, were less motivated by the desire to actually improve quality than by the need to demonstrate the efforts they were making to improve quality.

The research has revealed that UWC has chosen to direct its quality assurance system strongly towards the practices and processes of teaching and learning, in order to improve performance in this area and hence avoid losing state funding. In line with this decision, academics have been faced with a barrage of quality-related interventions and innovations directed at curriculum change.

## **6.7 Curriculum change through modularisation and alignment**

Outcomes based education (OBE) has been introduced at UWC as a means to improve student performance, thereby increasing pass rates and throughput and earning the university more money from the state. The introduction of OBE has been supported by a range of initiatives, chief amongst them modularisation, which involves the fragmentation of curricula around smaller, measurable outcomes. Constructive alignment, another significant initiative, has become standardised in some faculties as a preferred pedagogical approach within outcomes based education. Constructive alignment involves the alignment of content, teaching methodologies and assessment against outcomes.

Initiatives such as these have been supported by a range of internal quality policies – an assessment policy, teaching and learning policy, and moderation policy. Evidence collection, with reporting and recording of quality-related information, has assumed new relevance, arguably because it enables inspection by heads of departments, deans, and internal review and external audit teams.

Responses to this new quality environment have been varied. Academics have objected to spending huge amounts of time and energy negotiating the minefield of new quality assurance requirements, while the very nature and character of academic work itself has changed in accordance with the demands of this new environment. Despite these upheavals, many academics have embraced the focus on teaching and learning, believing that the quality assurance measures introduced have the potential actually to improve quality.

### **6.7.1 Embracing the quality assurance of teaching and learning**

Despite the earlier focus in this chapter on non-compliance and resistance, this research also found a significant trend amongst academics at UWC to identify with and endorse new quality assurance measures. Academics who felt this way applauded the effect of quality assurance on improving teaching and learning, through compelling a more heightened consciousness of learning issues, and invoking reflective and critical consideration of curriculum choices.

Emma supports the view that quality assurance processes often stimulate critical reflection and engagement with pedagogical matters.

*It's about getting people to engage with things like education theory, with things like what really happens when students learn and what is good learning. Is it good learning to sit and listen to a lecture for an hour or is it good learning to use some of what you hear and have to apply it to a small group activity? ... Yes, it is to get people to start engaging more with educational theory, to put it bluntly, and improve it. ... What I'm trying to achieve is to get people to bring how they offer learning opportunities closer to what students bring with them and are capable of engaging with it, so it is to try and close that gap.*

Emma attempts to describe academics' responses from the perspective of one driving quality assurance implementation, and records her efforts to actively link policy implementation with reflection towards improvement. Academics like Emma have bought into implementation on account of its potential for improvement,

Sandra similarly believes that the value of quality assurance lies precisely in its potential to improve quality through inviting critical reconsideration of practice:

*I think quality assurance is not only asking you to show that you're doing the right thing, but also to show you how to perhaps do something better. So in that sense I think it is the self-reflection part of the quality assurance that is actually good.*

In addition, there was also some feeling that the standardisation of methods and practices was a desirable innovation, bringing much-needed order and clarity to matters related to teaching and learning.

Lee supports the standardisation of interactions between students and supervisors, and the ease of monitoring which results from regularising these relationships:

*I am working in the postgraduate committee and there we are quite serious about quality, and one of the things we have imposed on ourselves is this MOU. We have voluntarily taken on more work to ensure that there's good quality, that it's easier to monitor and to manage the interaction between students and the supervisor. Whenever there is any kind of misunderstanding or conflict then we have a document from which to work. Our meeting is about quality, checking for quality in the research proposal also.*

Many academics felt that the quality assurance processes, underpinned by demands for accountability and transparency, were long overdue at UWC, and expressed broad acceptance of regulating and monitoring activities, as being essential to the achievement of quality.

Further, Nina believes that the quality assurance activities she engaged in contributed to her personal and professional development:

*There was definitely in the last ten years for me a huge amount of improvement in the quality. There were more formal structures introduced with academic planning, and the appointment of an academic planning officer – people that you could use as a resource. But for me, for my own personal development, was the whole process of going through the NQF and SAQA. That was very specific for me, there was a lot of development in that regard because suddenly you had to think about outcomes, what are you doing, how do these courses connect with one another? That I think was definitely a huge improvement in the quality.*

The data also showed that those academics who had a strong interest in pedagogical matters and education theory, alongside their disciplinary interests, were more likely to embrace quality assurance initiatives around teaching and learning, most notably those involving modularity, curriculum redesign and the effective alignment of teaching, learning and assessment practices against module outcomes.

### **6.7.2 Ambivalence: Compliance as burdensome, despite the benefits**



The data also indicate the existence of a degree of ambivalence amongst those who support measures directed at improving teaching quality and output. This ambivalence is related to recognition of the need to improve and an acceptance that quality assurance measures, by regulating certain practices, may have a positive impact on quality. At the same time, compliance is accompanied by frustration at the often unnecessarily bureaucratic and administratively burdensome nature of this new preoccupation with quality assurance.

Tom describes the quality assurance of teaching and its links with quality improvement in this way:

*Teaching has improved ... I do think at the end of the day the faculty keeping forward a focus on improving the methodology, being more precise about what you do, specifying your learning outcomes, challenging you to ... set questions in ways that are aligned with what you are trying to teach and to set assessment methodologies which are variable ... I see a general improvement in that. I have a much greater sense of confidence that people are aware of the parameters that are being set now, and are coming more and more into line with an appreciation of being more scientific in their teaching methods... I would say there's an improvement actually, on that front, definitely.*

However, later in the same interview, Tom dismisses the move to improve teaching by aligning outcomes, assessment and delivery as 'administrative management of teaching.'

Tom complains about the burden of being so explicit about practice:

*The big thing that I've found is that you've got to actually put another 40% of your time into teaching, because of the requirement to specify everything... We've got to have clear outcomes specified and each teaching utterance has to be linked to a learning outcome. In addition to that you have to prepare model answers, because it's got to be exact about what you're asking for.*

*You can't ask a set of questions and see what comes out. It's got to be much more anchored against the learning outcomes. So I find this sort of administrative management of teaching becomes a more demanding task. And then the requirements that ... that your assessment processes are much more precise. So you have to give written feedbacks on assessment forms, and those feedbacks have to become more promotive of the person's thinking. So you've got to pose questions, and if I think back to when I was taught, people would just tick it off. 'Good enough, 75 out of 80, nice bit of work.' This won't suffice any more.*

The apparent contradiction expressed by Tom, who vacillates between support and critique, is not uncommon amongst academics, and is related to their sense of wanting to do the right thing by the students, while feeling aggravated by the bureaucratic requirements of these measures, reducing the intent of improvement measures to serving the functions of monitoring and surveillance.

Like Tom, Amy first applauds the pedagogical benefits of introducing modularisation, describing this requirement as 'a spur to change':

*I suppose modularisation is partly a state trend. ....We ... had to re-arrange degree courses into programmes and my sense of this faculty is that a lot of that was really an exercise in maintaining the status quo and just rearranging it in different templates.*

*There were one or two occasions, certainly in our department, when there was a sense of doing things differently. It did actually... on one or two occasions, provide a ... 'Well, everything's changing so let's look at what we're doing.' So it was a chance to really rethink what we did. It wasn't just a rejigging of the old stuff. There were times where we introduced new courses, or introduced an innovation, at a time when we were going to have to redo all our module descriptors anyway, so we said, 'Let's think if we want to do something different.' So it was often a spur to change, to do things differently in our department.*

Later in her interview, Amy contradicts her statement of support for modularisation by bemoaning the introduction of unnecessary regulations and requirements, such as the invention of templates, which constantly change, for providing module descriptions:

*I think modularisation has produced another layer of bureaucracy and for department heads it has been quite exasperating when you've got your module descriptors and now there's a new template... There was a lot of trivial stuff that took up people's time as well, which made people feel that this was just an exercise, a bureaucratic exercise. It was an opening for innovation but there was also a lot of extra bureaucratic work in getting your template into the latest version and so on.*

The interesting aspect of Tom and Amy's views is the presence of contradictory statements. Amy appears to be a keen supporter of curriculum change but then proceeds to express her exasperation at the way in which such change is driven in the university.

One way to explain the apparent contradiction is by reference to the dilemma created as efforts to standardise and prescribe approaches to teaching and the curriculum result in greater control over what academics do in their classrooms. It seems as though gaining control over teaching has become a means of addressing the one quality matter UWC struggles with most – the quality of student output. Given the punitive nature of performance funding, where, according to Lee, '*Subsidy is now more linked to passes than to bodies,*' UWC management seem to operate from the premise that controlling the input of teaching should result in greater control over the output, namely student passes and graduation throughput.

Quality management of teaching at UWC ultimately serves to open up academics' classroom practices for inspection. Hence the burden of curriculum alignment - the descriptors, templates, files and reports that facilitate scrutiny - often obscures the benefits of quality improvement.

### **6.7.3 Compliance: aiding accountability and transparency**

The driving force for curriculum change at UWC is accountability. Academics at UWC are being held accountable for student performance and for improving efficiency of output. The idea of accountability is being conveyed to academics as a duty of responsibility towards their students. Many academics, driven by a desire to see their students succeed and prosper, appeared to welcome these curriculum change efforts.



Consequently, many of them were amenable to implementing new quality assurance practices, such as curriculum alignment, and were easily cajoled into engaging in demanding and oppressive processes.

Emma, a crusader for curriculum alignment in her faculty, explains what this process requires and in so doing inadvertently identifies aspects of the curriculum change approach that facilitate control and surveillance:

*My proposal (to the faculty) was that everybody look at teaching and learning in all of their programmes ... It was prompted by the modularisation process where the faculty was asked to do module descriptors where they had to describe the outcomes. That was the first step... Each staff member is ... compiling a module file and the module file's compilation is guided by a module descriptor.*

Emma adds that, at her insistence, academics are expected to complete not one but two different module descriptors, for each module taught:

*...the UWC module descriptor which the quality manager uses ... for capturing data, and one ... we call the quality assurance module descriptor which goes a lot further ...it also requires of staff to describe their assessment criteria and their assessment tasks.*

Emma then describes further complex requirements, which involve a description of teaching methods and up-front declarations of assessment strategies. These are followed by evidence collection - of students' work, marks achieved and feedback provided.

*A report is prepared, providing `reflection on the teaching and learning over time ... and then they have to file the students' evaluation of the module and their reflection of that and the action plans that emanate from that that they want to build into future modules.'*

Alice, a department head in Emma's faculty, supports the ideas of accountability through transparency associated with this approach to curriculum change:

*There is no other way to ensure that, for example, assessment tasks are aligned with exit level outcomes and with what is happening ... You don't see what is happening in the classroom, so unless you get ... pieces of somebody's work where they have given feedback to the students ... and you have got their own reflections, then you are unsure about what is happening and you can't offer any advice. So I do think that it makes people more accountable.*

In Alice's view, quality improvement demands that academics' classroom practices be exposed, to facilitate monitoring their practices for improvement.

A second notion of transparency, which benefits the students, is described by Avis (2000), who supports the alignment of the curriculum against outcomes for more egalitarian reasons:

*The concern is to render transparent the 'secret garden' of curricula and assessment. By using learning outcomes to describe the desired results of educative programmes it becomes readily apparent what these are, the ways in which these are assessed and thereby attained. The hope is that transparency will enable learners from non-traditional backgrounds to compete on the same terrain as the privileged. Learning outcomes render visible what traditional learners already know about education and assessment procedures acquired through cultural capital gathered during schooling and the resources of their families.*

Ironically, Caroline supports the ideas of transparency and explains why curriculum alignment against outcomes is required at UWC, and not at other universities. She supports Avis' (2008) description of the effect of such an approach in providing equitable opportunities:

*With the low-level students here at UWC, we take it on more strongly because then you've got some indicators as to what the student is doing. If you have a very good student coming they can sit and tell you so much and clearly are in charge of themselves and what they're doing. You don't really have to worry, 'Well now, can they conduct an interview?' because you can see by the way that they talk that they could.*

Caroline's almost mocking tone suggests that, had UWC been more selective in its intake, it would not have been necessary to engage in curriculum restructuring around learning outcomes.

Tom expresses his support of the increased transparency associated with this approach, but also declares, somewhat cynically, that *'there are no surprises in the pack of cards any more.'*

*It's asking for more transparency in what you are teaching, why you are teaching it, what you expect from it. ... Assessment methodologies have to be much more aligned with what you are teaching and why you're teaching it. And students also need to know exactly what they're being assessed on and why... So I find that there are no surprises in the pack of cards any more. It does make it a little bit easier for students actually, because I do get the sense that there's less room for the creative student who takes things further than what's specified... But it's a double-edged sword ... a double-edged sword.*

On the one hand, Tom supports the idea that alignment of the curriculum against outcomes is a more egalitarian means of enabling under-prepared students to succeed. However, his description of the approach as a ‘*double-edged sword*’ hinges on its propensity to promote a technician orientation to teaching:

*There is now increasing pressure to bring (teaching) into alignment with ... learning objectives... specifying exactly what courses are teaching people to ... be competent in .... to be much more ... manualised in the teaching organisation. I have some problems with that ... When you were a child you had paint by numbers ...and if you weren't particularly talented or capable you could still paint by numbers. But there is a massive gap between that and the person who is the spontaneous painter who does a creative painting. And I feel that learning has become learn by numbers, and I understand the need to specify, but I find that it's a little bit straitjacketing of teaching. I find there's a requirement to be so premeditated in what you are teaching ... it's a little bit like learning a technical skill. I think it does make you a bit of a mechanical teacher ...*

Tom seems to suggest that the attempt to prescribe an approach to the curriculum was valued by those, like Nina, who preferred direction over idiosyncrasy, but was not easily accepted by academics, who, like him, preferred spontaneity and creativity in the classroom.

Finally, the curriculum alignment process adopted, as described by Emma, can be seen as an attempt to capture the modularisation process in order to serve accountability requirements. Specifying learning outcomes, teaching methods, assessment strategies and detailing how reflection and course evaluations will benefit quality improvement, appeared to promote transparency while enabling inspection of academics' previously concealed pedagogic practices.

## **6.8. Compliance: UWC in transition**

It is clear from the research that pressure on academics to comply with external demands for quality are largely internally-driven and fuelled by the university's preoccupation with proving beyond any doubt that it is an institution of quality.

Elsewhere, I have accounted for the transition from historically disadvantaged institution, and argued that UWC's very existence depends on its ability to persuade the public and the state that it is a quality university.

The Rector might refer to this as an ‘*aspiration towards greatness*,’ but another way of explaining it is that the university’s survival as an independent higher education institution into the future requires the abandonment of the HBU label and a shift to demonstrating resoundingly that it is a place of quality.

Kenneth, an academic in Political Studies, captures the dilemma of having to accept the increased pressure associated with demonstrating quality as unavoidable and essential, while being burdensome and an irritation:

*There is a huge burden of extra work...There is a lot more paperwork gobbling up hours of one’s time ... linked to the invention of higher degrees committees and their concern that proposals for theses of masters and doctorates be the top standard. This is part of all the new mechanisms coming in. Quite a few persons at UWC have been over-defensive about the standing and reputation of UWC with the historically advantaged universities of the country. So it is a matter of professional pride to them to prove beyond reasonable doubt that there is nothing second class about UWC. Sometimes I think they’ve gone over the top in that ... in a way that other universities haven’t. But in the end you’ve just got to get on with the job ... the rest is just whining over coffee...*

*The famous merger report of 2002 suggested that ... perhaps there wasn’t so much a need for UWC to compete with two outstanding, top universities as neighbours. But I think in fact that has had the opposite effect. It has kept UWC on its toes and the fact that our toughest rivals are the closest universities to us has made us even more determined. You’ve got to deliver the goods. And it’s very clear that UWC has delivered the goods in a way for example the other HBU’s very often have not.*

Many instances of academic ambivalence towards quality assurance demands can be explained by reference to the dilemma Kenneth has described. Having chosen the route of demonstrating that it is an institution of worth, the university has had to throw in its lot with the state and embrace quality assurance demands, and even behave overzealously towards them, the impact of which is felt by the academics ‘at the chalkface’ (Webster and Mosoetsa, 2001). Kenneth describes this dilemma, identifies the problem it poses for the academic, and then dismisses the complaints about unreasonable quality demands as ‘*whining over coffee*.’

### 6.8.1 Compliance and a new relationship with the state

The decision by UWC's management and Council to transform the institution appears to have had two implications. One component of the transition involves 'burying the label of HBU or HDI,' while the other is centred around the crafting of a new relationship between UWC and the state.

The complexity of the changing relationship was best summed up by one of the senior executive members on the occasion of a meeting with potential funders, when he said:

*In the post-1994 period, UWC has worked at becoming a university that supports government and doesn't fight it.*

Having won the battle with the previous apartheid state, the focus at UWC is now on building its relationship with the new state.

This stance seems motivated by political and economic considerations. I approached this research with some curiosity and the desire to understand, given UWC's previous history of resisting the state and its demands, how and why it has become a university which has chosen to comply with the state's attempts to steer the higher education sector in particular directions.

Bulelwa, a professor of Education, believes that *'compliance has muted the voice of criticism'*. Resistance to external demands during a previous era has been replaced by an overzealous demonstration of willingness to support the new state's efforts to regulate the sector and to rein in higher education institutions.

An earlier analysis identified UWC's precarious financial position as driving its propensity to comply. A closer examination of the data around academic responses also reveals that this supportive and conciliatory approach towards the state, shared by institutional managers and many academics, is a strong factor in motivating compliance. One explanation of this orientation is that academics in the university have come to regard the state as acting legitimately in the post-apartheid era, and consider the new state's priorities to be legitimate and worthy of their support.

Amy describes her and her department's efforts to engage with and support state policy, and elaborates on the ways in which academics at UWC introduced curriculum innovations in support of state policy:

*I remember engaging with national policy. I remember when the White Paper on Higher Education came out which must have been in about 1997. I remember as a department we looked at it and it does talk a lot about higher education being not just preparation for the workplace... That really was also a time when I was thinking a lot about higher education in terms of 'What does it mean?' and just thinking about that in terms of government policy... That was a time in our department when we thought about ... what does it mean to be preparing students for the workplace? It means that we need to be ... building in more workplace skills.*

*In physics traditionally there's been very little focus on reading and writing and accessing texts. We kind of pulled that in more explicitly. And there was more of a focus on producing students that were critical. In fact at that point we introduced an environmental physics stream focusing very much more on environmental issues. The first-year courses always had a strong focus on societal issues. So I'm thinking how that really was an example of government policy and how we really did in the department engage with some of those ideas.*

The idea of UWC becoming an institution that supports the state and does not fight it, is evidently shared by many academics, and Amy's description of her department's efforts to implement state policy is a strong example of this.

Caroline saw the university's identification with national priorities, together with its lack of financial independence, as twin drivers of compliance.

*Question: What do you see as the main reasons for the prominence of quality assurance in policy in recent years? What was the impetus for that?*

*Well, it came politically with the ANC government, and then some universities have taken it on board more quickly than others. And this university isn't wealthy, so it can't be autonomous... it can't dictate the way HWIs do. They have kept some level of autonomy. So this university would have to be very egalitarian to fit in with the political status. And also, it represents the struggle here, I'm sure that history would carry weight as well. People want to be fair here - that's their history and their tradition.*

Caroline suggests that the university's conciliatory approach to the state is largely influenced by a shared orientation towards promoting equity, which has historical roots in the anti-apartheid struggle, and is also motivated by UWC's need to remain on the receiving end of the state's largesse.

The grounds for resonance between state priorities and academics' views of the purpose of a university appear to be located precisely in the overwhelming support for the institution's mission-in-use, in its social justice objectives.

Higher education policy emanating from the state is explicit about the link between a quality university education and the drive to enable economic and social mobility and transformation through the development of human capital, most especially for the poor and disadvantaged.

Sandra hints at the synergies which exist between her view of the purpose of higher education and that of the state:

*The government wants to make sure that it gets the best returns on its money, but it's not just about that. The National Department of Education should take as its responsibility to build a healthy nation and look in particular at education and ensure that a quality education is brought to the nation. So I think that would be a fair expectation. I think the current government is far more aware of that sort of thing.*

Sandra appears to share the state's commitment to 'building a healthy nation,' and subtly contrasts the new state's orientation towards development with the apartheid state's neglect of national development needs.

Emma, centrally involved in academic development activities at UWC, sheds light on the phenomenon of resonance between state intentions (especially towards improving the position of those previously marginalised), academics' views of quality, and their views of the mission and purpose of UWC:

*I certainly have more of an idea of what the state expects. My own ideas have been opened in these last five years to bills, policies, white papers, directives, manuals... I also have a much better idea of the NQF and SAQA and .... how our society can benefit. Certainly from that point of view I think there is definitely a change. I read somewhere someone called quality audits policing, as opposed to developmental. The HEQC should try to allay fears about it not being policing and indicate that it is developmental. I do perceive the intention of it as being nurturing, supportive and developmental. I think it is part of transforming of our society. I think it is part of making South Africa a better place ... I think the state is serious about its responsibility in terms of making sure that we provide good education...*

Emma expresses strong support for quality assurance initiatives, such as audits, viewing these as developmental and not as instances of surveillance or *policing*. She also suggests, like Sandra, that she has approached state policy in a positive way, familiarising herself with policy documents and showing a willingness to support policy intentions through her work.

Nina, despite providing a cogent analysis of the erosion of institutional autonomy, demonstrates her support for the values driving the changes which have resulted in the curtailment of academic freedom:

*When I was a student I always had the impression the university I was at ... did their own thing, made their own decisions ... When I started here - it all has to do with history, how UWC specifically operated and the way that they did things, and suddenly this whole SAQA alignment was required... I suddenly started to realise that universities were being asked to take responsibility for what they are putting out there and how they are doing it...*

*In the apartheid era, universities could do what they wanted because the system allowed them to... I think universities had much more autonomy... They were allowed to function on their own. With the new government trying to improve the quality of life and quality of training for the population... the state should play a role in monitoring quality, to assess how money is spent, what institutions do with their funds. I would imagine the state has the responsibility to see that people are trained so that they can move forward economically and socially, to ensure they get the best training for the available funds.*

In Nina's view, the autonomy granted historically white institutions, like the one she studied at, was worth sacrificing in the interest of advancing social justice and promoting equity. She believes that the state's intrusive role in education, *in monitoring quality*, was justified by the intended outcome, namely an improvement in the quality of life of South Africa's population.

The earlier analysis of academics' views on quality has demonstrated that many academics favour an approach to quality that is linked to a desire for equity and social justice. They find the state's goal of transforming higher education towards the achievement of public good irresistible and persuasive, and therefore worth supporting.



## **6.9. Academics' responses and the context of disadvantage**

From the conversations with academics and university managers during this research, an important subtext emerged. This subtext was revealed through numerous references to the impact on quality of historical disadvantage, both in the context of inadequate resourcing of the university as an HBU and in the continuing under-preparedness of its students. Bad schooling, levels of poverty and lack of cultural capital were identified as the markers of disadvantage, and the quality of the UWC student intake was seen as negatively affected by these. The context of disadvantage was framed as one of great challenge. The lack of institutional physical resources, the absence in students of core skills in the critical areas of mathematics and language, and the absence of the material conditions to support success, were identified as key elements constituting this situation of disadvantage.

Given that challenging context, the university's decision to commit itself to improving quality through improving performance against efficiency indicators was seen by academics as serving instead to hinder and delay the achievement of quality and even of equitable outcomes.

For example, the attempt by the state, through differential funding, to steer enrolments towards Science, Engineering and Technology and away from the Humanities and Social Science was supported by UWC, which responded to this imperative with vigour. Statistics indicate just how far along the path it had come to exceeding the minimum standards of performance in this area through linking student growth to growth in those preferred areas. The fact that the differential funding system rewarded student enrolments in these areas up to four times more than in other disciplinary areas also fired UWC's enthusiasm. Considering that precisely those areas presented the greatest challenge to the university's students, achievement in Science, Engineering and Technology would undoubtedly demand excessive investment of time and commitment on the part of academics in developing students' abilities in those areas.

Academics conceivably found themselves under immense pressure to deliver graduates in those areas and to deliver those graduates in a minimum time to satisfy time-to-degree indicators. It is not difficult to imagine the impact on quality of the often contradictory factors pulling academics in multiple, divergent directions.

With pressure exerted on academics to improve research output, to focus on teaching and learning efforts to improve graduate success, and to bring funding into the institution through self-initiated partnerships, it is small wonder that so many academics felt burdened and aggrieved by these demands.

Many also highlighted the impractical and even misguided nature of a focus on the improvement of indicators associated with notions of quality as value for money, in the particular context of disadvantage described above. The following quote by Susan expresses this view succinctly:

*You shouldn't demand from the people who teach those students to write research articles for journals. I think people feel ... angry, because at UWC they get a particular quality of student ... You come here because you come from particular difficulties. And you cannot expect the people who have to deal with those difficulties, who have to transform that person into a scholar, to write academic articles, to organise conferences, to be at the forefront in their field. I think it's ridiculous to expect that. But you should keep as many of those who do it well as possible and pay them well and say also to the others, 'That which you are doing is also excellent because you are saving hundreds of students a year,' students who have few other choices and perhaps have just that one year to make it work.*

Susan suggests that UWC should value academics' efforts to turn under-prepared students into scholars more explicitly, rather than placing emphasis only on those academic activities which generate funding and income.

The data revealed a significant degree of disappointment in the new state, which many felt had 'let down' the HBUs, UWC and even the poor. Kenneth articulates this sense of frustration directed at the failure of the state to fulfil particular post-apartheid expectations:

*While about a third or a quarter of our students have got full cost bursaries...it seems that even the full cost bursaries do not cover textbooks ... so we had to abandon prescribing textbooks when the proportion of the class who bought them dropped from one third to ... one tenth of the students. I do feel that what they could do is to give a free dictionary and a free world atlas to every student entering UWC. I feel we have been financially let down. The university is producing the first black generation of professionals and businesses which a whole transformation project of BEE ... depends on... Now we have already reached the stage in the 13<sup>th</sup> year of democracy and 18 years after the effective collapse of apartheid that we are getting the children of middle-class blacks here, so they are able to cope with the financial situation, but it does limit mobility for the children of the unemployed to escape poverty and join the middle class...*

Kenneth suggests the state has abrogated its responsibilities to the poor by not providing poor students with sufficient financial support, and through not offering UWC additional support to produce sufficient numbers of black students to take up positions of leadership in society. In his view, lack of support by the state for poor students has limited the upward mobility of the black working class.

A number of interviewees expressed their disappointment that the post-apartheid state had failed to provide some form of compensation to UWC for the financial sacrifices it had made in performing its particular role in struggle. For example, 'opening the doors of learning' was regarded by many as an act almost mandated by the ANC in exile, as was the university's 1993 decision to enroll students irrespective of whether they could pay for their studies. In fact it was variously suggested that the latter decision was made on the basis of a promise of eventual compensation from the first Minister of Education.

There was fairly strong feeling not only that UWC's loyalty and support for the anti-apartheid struggle should be rewarded but that the institution should also be compensated for the loss of key academic staff members, who left to fill cabinet and other positions in the new government.

Albert expresses a sense of betrayal at these expectations not being fulfilled, in a conversation about changes in the relationship between the state and UWC:

*In the past 15 years the state has stopped sending its police into the university (Laughs). Well, in fact we now find policemen walking in here but they are coming to class in their uniform. There has been a definite change. It is there for everyone to see that in the old days we were not the blue-eyed boy of the old government. We created and we enlarged the gap with the autonomy that we sought and eventually had, but that was important as part of the major move towards confronting the old government. So we were not the blue-eyed boy of the government and I don't think today we are the blue-eyed boy of this government, but we have confidence in the government and the government in us...*

*I am sure I am talking for most of us here on campus when I say that we think the government can be just a little more considerate towards us on the basis ... of what I mentioned earlier about when HWIs were training company directors and so on and we were turning out teachers and those teachers never got to manage their own companies. That is why today the donations do not snow upon us as they do upon the HWIs. I just think the government needs to compensate somehow for that sort of thing.*

Albert's light-hearted opening line about policemen on campus serves as an interesting metaphor for the transition UWC is engaged in, from a university that fought the state (hence the presence of police on campus) to one that supports it (through educating its police officers).

Albert also expresses his disappointment that the post-apartheid state has failed to reward UWC for its willingness to confront the apartheid state in order to bring about change. He also expects some compensation for the fact that UWC was constrained by apartheid policy in terms of the qualifications it was allowed to offer. HWIs, on the other hand, have continued to reap the benefit, in the form of massive alumni donations, of graduating large numbers of white students during apartheid, who filled top positions in the economy and society.

UWC management have deliberately carved out a relationship with the state that is based on support rather than on confrontation and challenge. Indeed, academics have given credence to the notion of UWC becoming a university that supports rather than fights the state, through empathising with the values and policy goals that drive the state's transformation agenda.

Yet the sense of feeling let down by the new state, as expressed by Kenneth and Albert, as well as the sense of being undervalued, as expressed by Susan, seems to sit uncomfortably with academics' willingness to continue to support the post-apartheid state.

This tension, between the anger and frustration that result from feeling let down and undervalued, and the willingness to comply with state demands, is reflected in the contradictory statements that are interspersed through academics' conversations. It is unclear, yet intriguing to consider, how this tension will play itself out in academics' responses to ongoing quality assurance demands emanating from the state in the future.

#### **6.10. Explaining ambivalence**

The shift to accountability for the achievement of national priorities is experienced increasingly at UWC as an expectation that academics should take responsibility for the achievement of output targets and other performance indicators. On the one hand, academics identify with the values of transformation implicit in the accountability demands and the attempts to steer the sector in particular directions, namely towards economic and social development.

On the other hand, there remains a measure of resentment and anger at the state's attempts to regulate and control the academic project, which is fairly widely regarded as an infringement on academics' rights and freedom and an encroachment on academic boundaries.

The contradictions discernible in conversations with many academics about quality assurance and state regulation are ample evidence of the ambivalence with which they regard the state's intentions and interventions. The language they use shows them grappling with a sense of annoyance at the burdens created by excessive quality assurance demands, coupled with a desire and willingness to support the state's endeavours to achieve change and an improvement in the conditions of the poor and marginalised.

Bulelwa describes the ambivalence associated with appreciating the benefits of reflection, through self-evaluation, and the irritations associated with being expected to comply with external expectations:

*In some ways it has been an imposition for us because there are certain things you have to do and you have to do it in a particular way. Like the self-evaluation portfolio and its particular criteria. We may not necessarily have approached the programme in that way, so at one level it is an imposition. At another level it does get you to reflect on it, so I have a kind of ambivalent response to that.*

UWC has also imposed, over and above the ample expectations emanating from the state, its own quality assurance demands which often exceed external minimum requirements but which are designed to demonstrate 'beyond reasonable doubt' the existence of levels of quality comparable with those of the previously advantaged universities.

Hence the strong focus on recording evidence, on managing and assuring the quality of teaching (*'to the nth degree,'* according to Tom), and on exercising excessive control of the decisions of supervisors and external examiners. It could even be argued that the university's internal quality assurance is more heavily directed at control and surveillance than that of the state. The overzealous demands of the university, coupled with the demanding expectations of the state's quality assurance structures, has led to a situation of undue and unreasonable pressure on academics and on their working lives.

### 6.10.1 Ambivalence and overzealous quality assurance

A further implication of the university's overzealousness, its efforts to bury its past and to indicate its support and alliance with the new state (for financial and political reasons), is that often the decisions made by its leadership are directed at anticipating future moves of the state.

In this regard, some of the academics interviewed have accused the institution of often acting pre-emptively and inappropriately as a result of second-guessing the state's next moves. This form of over-compliance, it has been argued, has resulted in a huge waste of resources, including academics' time and effort, as institutional efforts have been harnessed towards initiatives resulting from miscalculations and even false starts.

Don criticises what he regards as the unnecessary and resource-consuming shift towards modularisation and re-curriculation at UWC:

*I do think that things like the qualifications framework ...the registration of qualifications in new ways - means that there are new requirements that have got to be met that are messy. We have got to have those module descriptors and so on. And ... those will be an irritation for people ... I have yet to be convinced of their real usefulness. They were supposed to be things that were transparent, but here at UWC actually you are involved in too many different discourses for that to be the case. So I think that there has probably been quite a lot of wasted energy around those things...*

Don's tone and language suggest that the investment in modularisation by UWC has been a costly mistake.

Carol complains about a series of curriculum change processes her department was required to undertake, and suggests that these, likewise, amounted to wasting resources on things that were assumed to be required ahead of the state's confirmation that they were in fact necessary:

*The first time we did this re-curriculation we did it wrong because it was not expected of us to do it and we responded to the NQF and SAQA processes. Most disciplines here jumped on the bandwagon that you have to have in-service training and workplace experience and all of that. We then went through a three-phase change. We had the curriculum I was trained in, then we changed it in response to SAQA and realignment of programmes and we brought in a new programme in terms of responding to the world of work... But if you consider that the curriculum we've put in place now reflects the first curriculum, we should not have changed. We should not have responded to a higher landscape environment when it was not required to do so. We did it because we thought everyone was doing it and it was detrimental to us.*

Carol concludes by suggesting that *'we did it because we thought everyone was doing it.'* This instance of over-compliance through pre-emptive action appears to have been motivated by UWC's desire to be seen to be in the forefront in responding to change, and to avoid being shown up by other institutions' levels of responsiveness.

As a result of my work with departments during review processes, I became aware of another example of anticipating the state's requirements. During 2000, UWC managers became aware of a possible shift towards programmes, as a form of organising curricula in higher education. Much effort was put into research at UWC into restructuring the curricula around programmes, advisory documents were prepared and made available to departments, and the upshot was that the practice of organising qualifications around a disciplinary major or two was abandoned. Academics at UWC barely understood the new curriculum requirements of designing programmes, and confusion ensued for a few years.

Many academics argued in later departmental reviews that the shelving of majors, and replacing them with a confusing arrangement of core and elective modules, led to a downswing in enrolments in certain departments, while the requirement to design qualifications around programmes has, at this point, not yet been enforced by the state.

## **6.11 Conclusion**

The focus of this chapter has been on demonstrating that increased quality assurance demands have been driven by pressure on the university to improve performance against national benchmarks and other efficiency indicators. The university's underperformance in terms of national indicators, such as graduate success and time to degree, and the need to report to the state on improvement in these areas, were critical factors driving change in the internal quality assurance system.

The analysis has revealed the tensions and contradictions resulting from the university's decision to comply wholeheartedly with the state's transformation demands by adopting the discourse and practices embedded in a value for money and efficiency approach to quality and its improvement.

Academics' responses have been categorised broadly as non-compliance, surface compliance and compliance, while an attempt has been made to explain ambivalence in academics' responses, and the fact that many academics across the spectrum regard quality assurance implementation as burdensome and an irritation.

This study focused on refusal as non-compliance, and found that a critical element in non-compliance involved academics' fiercely resisting encroachment on academic work in terms of the boundaries they defined for such work. Resistance to encroachment, or the defense of academic turf, was associated with resistance to the gradual erosion of academic freedom, as perceived by academics. Refusal was best understood in the context of growing mistrust by the state and university managers, which was manifested in increased demands for record-keeping, documentation and reporting for the purposes of monitoring academic behaviour and action.

While some academics welcomed these demands as providing order and structure to a previously flexible and open system of academic accountability, many others viewed them as forms of policing and as introducing an added burden of paperwork to serve the increased bureaucratisation of the academic project.

The extent to which academics regarded quality assurance measures as improving quality was largely, but not exclusively, dependent on the degree of match between the state's and their views of quality and how it should be improved, their views on the purpose and function of a university education, and their political position in relation to the priorities and transformation objectives of the post-apartheid state.

Firstly, this analysis attempted to locate academics' responses in the context of a university in transition, where such transition involved, firstly, 'ditching the HBU label' and seeking future sustainability for the university as an institution of excellence.

Secondly, the transition also involved carving out a new relationship between state and university, one built not on a past history of acrimony and opposition but on alliance building and the brokering of support and partnerships at all levels of its interaction with the new state.



These elements of transition provided for an at times overzealous willingness on the part of university managers to comply with national quality demands, resulting in increasing quality assurance pressure on academics, a change in the nature of academic work, and a redefinition, by persons other than themselves, of the boundaries of academic work.

The willingness to behave in ways which supported the goals of the post-apartheid state constantly came up against the anger and frustration felt by academics, and even institutional managers, at the refusal of the new state to provide compensation, or at least offer special consideration, to UWC. Disappointment arose from the unfulfilled expectation of redress from the state, in the light of UWC's history and in the light of the challenges it persistently faced in continuing to provide equitable opportunities for access and success for the poor and marginalised sectors of the population.

The following chapter will discuss and analyse the central findings of this research in such a way as to achieve a synthesis of various findings presented in this and the previous chapter. It will also reflect on the findings in relation to the research question and conceptual framework of this study.