CHAPTER FIVE

Reporting on the findings of the research

What are the different conceptions of quality and quality assurance amongst stakeholders in higher education in South Africa?

5.1.   Introduction

This chapter reports on the findings of the study as they relate to different understandings of quality amongst academics and university managers. It focuses largely on quality as fitness for purpose, as transformation, and as `value-added'. Different notions of quality as excellence are also explored. The purpose is to present a broad range of understandings of quality, as held by academics and institutional managers.

5.2   Talking about quality

I approached this question in interviews in a rather indirect way, believing that asking a number of quality-related questions would reveal richer and more nuanced data about people's understanding of quality than simply asking interviewees, "What is quality?"

Core interview questions related to quality were as follows:

> *When we talk of trying to improve quality in higher education, what do you think we should be trying to improve?*
>
> *In trying to assess the quality of an institution, what should we be focusing on or what should we be looking at?*
>
> *Would you say that quality in this university has improved, stayed the same or declined during the time you've been here?*
>
> *What makes it easy or difficult to achieve quality here?*
>
> *Among the definitions of quality found in the literature, such as value for money, fitness for purpose, transformation, and excellence, which of the following definitions resonates the most with you? Explain why.*

The last question listed here was accompanied by a description of definitions of quality, as adapted from Harvey and Green (1993). The range of data was more than satisfactory. I was able to get interviewees to discuss Harvey and Green's quality typography, but only after having elicited their own views of quality, unhindered by academic discourse.

The views on quality which emerged fitted fairly neatly into Harvey and Green's definitions of quality as fitness for purpose, excellence, transformation and value for money, although they were described and named differently by interviewees. For example, the notion of quality as *fitness for purpose* grew to include conceptions of quality as sense-making, as mission achievement, as multiple responsiveness, and as building a better society. Data analysis demonstrated that all these were variations on the theme of fitness for purpose. This was just one example of the richness of interpretation which emerged within single categories of quality definition.

The data revealed conceptions of quality which were both unexpected and fascinating. At first, I was rather reluctant to classify these within Harvey and Green's existing typology, wanting to retain them as quite independent and new categories. Conceptions of quality such as authentic dialogue and engagement, as value-added, as social upliftment and as serving the public good were exciting and new to me, and I was keen to hold onto them as separate categories. Further analysis, however, revealed that in fact they served to expand upon the concept of quality as transformation. Interestingly, the data which emerged around transformation extended the concept to include personal as well as social and political transformation. This realisation offered sufficient compensation for my having to abandon the creation of new definitions of quality.

Harvey and Green's (1993) definitions of quality provided both a framework for exploring how academics, managers and senior managers in one university conceptualise quality and a means of unpacking conceptualisations of quality amongst these groups. What follows is an account of the data, which is presented within themes that problematise and elaborate on formal categories of quality such as excellence, fitness for purpose and transformation.

These reflect tensions and debates within this university relating to the intersection of past values with new ones and the problem of applying standardised measures of quality across institutional contexts in South African higher education.

At a deeper analytical level, the data reveal the existence of different understandings of quality at UWC. These varied descriptions of quality by academics and managers suggest the presence of a powerful philosophical and political tension, one that permeates all aspects of university life. This tension is played out within competing discourses of quality – academics appear to favour a conceptualisation of quality which is context-bound and internal (quality as fitness for purpose and transformation), while university managers endorse a view of quality which is externally-directed and driven by the pursuit of rewards and gains (quality as excellence and value for money).

An analysis of the data will shed light on the phenomenon of institutional transformation. In doing so, it will suggest that institutions effect change with great difficulty and often at great cost. The data will show that tensions around quality are a proxy for contestation over institutional identity, and reflect a struggle for power between academics and managers for the right to determine the post-apartheid identity and purpose of the university. These tensions also reflect a struggle for the right to define what quality is, how it ought to be measured and managed, and, ultimately, how the institution ought to be judged and assessed.

Furthermore, apparent contradictions and ambivalence in the discourse of academics and managers are themselves evidence of a university in transition, as opposed to one existing in a steady state, engaged in transformation over a lengthy period of time. In this context of transition, old historically-bequeathed identities coexist and conflict with the university's new aspirations. These in turn were forged in the course of responding to and pursuing rewards from various powerful constituencies, chief amongst them the Evaluative State, making the discourse inconsistent and contradictory within and across layers of the institution.

5.3   Views of quality: Fitness for purpose and transformation

A rough classification of the interview data around definitions of quality demonstrates that most of the academics interviewed chose fitness for purpose as resonating most with their own view of quality. Secondly, an overwhelming majority of this group selected quality as transformation as their second definition of choice. The overlap of these choices invited a closer examination of how these quality concepts were understood.

This scrutiny revealed, firstly, that views on fitness for purpose related purpose overwhelmingly to the university's mission, rather than to external goals and policies. There were, however, a few exceptions. Most notably, academics in disciplines with links to professional bodies in areas such as health, as well as those with an interest in training students for specific occupations in industry, related purpose to the learning outcomes expressed in the qualifications or directions pursued by their students.

The congruence between understandings of fitness for purpose and transformation could be accounted for by the extent to which respondents chose to identify with transformative elements within the university's mission. Stated differently, most academics interviewed for this study valued those elements of the university's mission which they believed reflected a commitment to transformation in a number of areas.

In their view, these transformative elements were embedded in aspects of UWC's mission, in particular those which promoted the expansion of access as a step towards achieving social justice, and those which foregrounded community engagement as a means of pursuing an agenda of social development and even of social change.

5.3.1 Equity versus excellence in the institutional mission

The current mission statement of UWC is a long and convoluted one, marked by attempts at negotiating different positions regarding the direction the university's post-apartheid transition should take. It could even be argued that the university's mission reflects the different purposes and functions of universities in general, both nationally and globally. Its mission statement reveals contradictions and incongruities.

Discourse around the pursuit of equity coexists with aspirations towards excellence. Both local and global contexts are acknowledged as shaping identity, while development goals are articulated alongside a language of global competitiveness. The following extract from the mission statement illustrates this view:

The University of the Western Cape is a national university, alert to its African and international context as it strives to be a place of quality, a place to grow from hope to action through knowledge. It is committed to excellence in teaching, learning and research, to nurturing the cultural diversity of South Africa, and to responding in critical and creative ways to the needs of a society in transition.
Drawing on its proud experience in the liberation struggle, the university is aware of a distinctive academic role in helping build an equitable and dynamic society.

While the actual mission refers in vague and ambiguous terms to aims related to serving both equity and development goals, this study shows that the mission in use amongst academics is a very simple one. The latter characterises UWC as a university where community engagement is central to its activities, and as an institution committed to broadening access towards the attainment of social justice. One interviewee, Caroline, a professor, articulated this bluntly and somewhat cynically, "*UWC has a mission to uplift the previously educationally disadvantaged.*" I say cynically, because she proceeded to suggest that UWC's ongoing attempts to uplift the previously educationally disadvantaged precluded the possibility of the institution ever being a place of quality.

The complexities of unravelling distinctions between the various missions in use are further demonstrated when one considers that members of senior management of the university interviewed for this study have a somewhat different view of the university's role. Thabo's understanding of UWC's mission is shrouded in descriptions of visions and aspirations of excellence which involve '*producing large numbers of students with great ability,*' while Rafieck attempts to detach the concept of engagement from its associations with marginalised communities by reconfiguring the notion of partnerships (previously used mainly in the context of disadvantaged communities) to foreground those associated with business and industry.

Some of the tensions between these different positions are described by Bulelwa, a senior academic, as she reflects on her struggle with the competing demands of excellence and equity:

I watched a movie yesterday by this American woman, Molly Blank…and I cried….. We were discussing entry level requirements the day before in our faculty, and I'm kind of ambivalent. On the one hand, you want to attract quality students. On the other hand there was a sentence in there (the movie) *that really hit me. It said, 'Mongamo was the best student at Oscar Mpetha High School but yet his results were not good enough for UCT.' Now there are so many Mongamos at UWC. How do you give them those opportunities? So in that sense, giving opportunities to people - for me that is part of the public good.*

The conversation around quality as fitness for purpose must be grounded in an understanding of contestation and the relationships of power between academics and managers, as well as between their ideas about what universities are for.

In linking fitness for purpose with quality as transformation, academics demonstrate the power which, although limited, they retain in determining both the goals and outcomes of a university education. From their perspective, UWC will continue to operate into the post-apartheid era, drawing on a mission which values equity above certain notions of excellence and which foregrounds development in a local rather than global sense.

Simply put, embracing a commitment to the transformative elements of the university's mission is translated by many academics into a political stance. This includes broadening access to include the poor and educationally under-prepared – a social justice orientation – and a conceptualisation of engagement which defines communities as those previously oppressed and still marginalised. Senior managers, on the other hand, keen to shift the university towards entrepreneurialism and global competitiveness, embrace a very different mission, one characterised by a discourse which values excellence, efficiency and the need to strengthen profit-driven partnerships.

The management of the university has adopted the notion of UWC as an 'engaged' university as a way of signaling the transitional space between the diametrically opposed purposes and functions encapsulated in the current mission. The 'engaged university' thus attempts to detach the concept of engagement from its development context, while defining the parameters for transition from HBU.

UWC's Institutional Operational Plan (2004-2009), prepared for the Department of Education with the aim of demonstrating future sustainability in an effort to secure recapitalisation funding from the state, articulates the notion of engagement as follows:

The Engaged University envisions a future that transcends past struggles in favour of an institution that is shaped by the congruencies and contradictions between transformation and global competitiveness, accelerated by technological advances. At the Engaged University these tensions are balanced to make a number of trends discernible. The institution offers economically viable and financially sustainable programmes, achieves excellence in teaching and learning and greater heights of distinction and competitiveness in selected priority research areas. Equitable access opportunities are available to students on the basis of ability and potential to succeed. This sustainable growth scenario is most probable, plausible and favoured by the university.

The above quote suggests a mission ascribed to by institutional managers. It embraces broadening access, but only on the basis of educational ability and students' potential to succeed. This view contrasts with academics' beliefs that UWC should also continue granting opportunities to those who lack strong educational backgrounds, and whose success largely depends on academics' willingness to expend the extra time and effort required to help them succeed. Most of the academics interviewed located broadening access squarely within a social justice framework - hence their determination to make a difference through making opportunities available to those who, as a result of poor schooling in the ghettoes of South Africa, were least likely to be admitted to any other local university, and who were most in need of the personal and social rewards that could accrue from a university education.

5.3.2   Fitness for purpose, transformation and the power of context

Newton (2007), in presenting lessons learnt about quality, notes that *"quality is not a 'blank sheet': context and circumstance impact on our intentions"* (2007: 20).

Context and circumstance appear to have a strong influence on how quality is understood at UWC, especially in the case of academics who have been at the university for many years and who disclosed that their values and beliefs drove them to take up positions there and to remain, despite lower salaries, high teaching loads and more burdensome administrative loads than those experienced at many other universities.

Don describes the values that have kept him at UWC for more than 30 years:

> *I would not be here at UWC if I did not believe it was hugely important for South Africa to be taking the people it has and moving them as fast as it can be done to being able to be confident participators in global society... I am deeply committed to that and that's why I landed up here…when I could have had a number of other really quite classy appointments. I was offered them and I said, No. I wanted to be here because I felt if I was going to stay (in South Africa) this is where I needed to be.*

Don illustrates the view of a number of interviewees, who suggested that their choice to remain at UWC, despite the employment conditions and infrastructural constraints, was motivated by a personal desire to intervene positively in the lives of young black people,

The particular notion of quality as fitness for purpose, adopted by academics like Don, is characterised by commitment and accountability to a particular interpretation of the mission of the university, namely its socially transformative purpose.

In the view of many interviewees, UWC's uniquely developmental mission of providing access to designated and disadvantaged groups and so helping fast-track black and working-class students to access and succeed at higher education, enables a number of transformations – those of personal, economic and social upliftment,

Lee, an academic for 27 years in the Science Faculty, describes UWC as an *'engaged university that tries to uplift people.'* Further in the interview, he echoes Don's sentiments when he says:

> *I'm here because I like working with students as well as the research side. Research is exciting. You've always got something to stimulate you and I like working with students. I particularly like being at UWC because you see students coming from squatter camps and going into good jobs, eventually, and to me that's very rewarding. For that reason, I've stuck it out and I probably will not move now because of my age. But I have had the opportunity to move.*

Lee's view of quality, like Don's, appears embedded in the personal gratification of witnessing and participating in a transformation which has moved large numbers of students out of a lifetime of poverty.

Other interviewees similarly identified with the mission of social and personal upliftment. Many cast the university's role as that of taking young people out of township shacks and transforming them into successful senior employees, serving both the public sector and large companies. Albert, a science professor, characterises UWC's social justice role in the post-apartheid era in the following way:

> *Many years ago we … were forced to train teachers only because …. jobs were not that available to black people. But now recently there have been many more opportunities and we want our students to be able to take up positions in those directions, in banking and insurance, marine and coastal management, forestry, and many more positions that require high levels of mathematical expertise … We want to prepare our students for those markets.*

Albert's appreciation of UWC as serving a social justice mission, and his conceptualisation of the transformative dimensions of accountability, permeates other interviewees' understandings of quality, and may explain why a majority of respondents felt that the notion of quality as 'fitness for purpose' resonated most with their thinking.

The data reveals a fairly common perception that such a mission should be supported almost as a matter of principle, that it is almost sacred, with academics performing service associated with higher education as a 'public good'. Quality as fitness for purpose thus comes to be equated with a notion of quality as mission-directed, measurable by the extent to which this aspect of the mission is achieved.

5.4. Quality as transformation: acknowledging the value added

The notion of quality as transformation is inextricably tied up with the notion of quality as fitness for purpose in the minds of those who value the transformative elements of the mission-in-use. When one then considers the characteristics of quality as transformation which emerge in the data, a number of interesting variations emerge. This section will explore the notion of adding value in relation to transformation.

Harvey (1997), in discussing the value-added dimension of transformation, argued that:

> *Value added is a measure of quality in terms of the extent to which the educational experience enhances the knowledge, skills and abilities of students. A high quality institution would be one that greatly enhances its students. Oxbridge may produce some 'brilliant' first class graduates, but having had brilliant school leavers in the first place they might not have added very much (1997: 138).*

Harvey and Green's view that quality should be measured by the extent to which institutions add value in relation to the educational quality of their intake found wide support amongst academics.

The interviewees' discussions of the notion of quality as value-added often reflect strong disappointment that the current quality measurement system, applied through the state and its agencies, consistently fails to take account of the value-added dimension of quality at places like UWC, and that the exclusion of the value-added aspect from the quality count serves to undervalue the most central achievements of the university in empowering its students. Harold, an academic in the Economic and Management Sciences, describes the dilemma of evaluating quality for the purpose of comparing institutions without taking into account value added as a relative dimension of quality.

> *If we were to compare … our institution with others, we have to look at the net benefit of what occurs while a student is studying here and earning a degree. And that makes it so much more difficult to assess whether we are a quality institution compared to rival institutions around us. If we start with an average of D students and they end up being competent C's, and the other side started with B's and ended up with B's, we have added more value relative to them. You have to look at the resources we have – intellectual resources, input, student resources and the physical resources ...You have to look at how much value we add relative to our resources.*

While Harold recommends that measures of quality should include some means of assessing the intake and exiting quality of students in relation to institutional resources, Lee remarks on the enormity of the task required to achieve this kind of transformation, one which he feels is undervalued in relation to other quality indicators:

> *We start with student material that's so much lower … and there's more pressure to pass students. 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 far more selective in their intake. We'll certainly try, but it's hard to fill in the background.*

Lee argues for a measure of quality that does more than reward the teaching output of universities by conferring state funding pegged to pass rates and throughput. He echoes the frustration felt by many academics who feel their efforts towards student development will remain undervalued in a context where quality is measured largely by the use of efficiency indicators such as pass rates and throughput.

The discussion of the transformative quality of the student experience centred around the university's achievement in relation to the quality of the student intake, and characterised the academic's role of teacher and mentor as key to the improvement of quality. It appears that UWC's 'students' are central to the approach to quality favoured by the academics interviewed, and it can be expected that their notions of how quality ought to be improved will similarly revolve around this critical factor.

The data revealed that a commitment to quality as transformation led many interviewees to conceptualise the ethos of UWC as one reflecting a serious commitment to teaching. This is understandable, given that the task of adding value is framed by academics as demanding extraordinary investment in teaching and in mentoring educationally under-prepared students. The scale of this investment in incoming students was articulated in language that spoke of '*picking people up from where they are,*' of '*mopping up,*' of needing to '*build students' self-esteem,*' and of needing to '*convince them that these challenges are for you and you can take them up.*'

UWC students were portrayed as having taking a beating, as it were, from the school system, from society, and even, in the case of transferring students, from other universities. New students were described as vulnerable, lacking in self-confidence, nursing injuries to their self-esteem and even, as Albert suggested, to their basic humanity, when they arrived. There was a sense that they needed to be coaxed both into learning and into being at university. A number of academics described the nature of the student intake at UWC and the great responsibility they felt towards the students:

Albert described UWC's most vulnerable students as follows:

> *We receive so many students who … lack self-confidence. I think that is one of the things that we build here that is different from what people achieve elsewhere. You intake the students and they come from a background where … the parents are illiterate. I'm not talking about first generation graduates. I'm talking about kids… who maybe grew up with their grandmother and there is illiteracy at home and they come here and it is a major step forward for them. They come here and are insecure and one has to assure them that, 'Look, you have a right to be here. You have a place here and these challenges are for you and you may take them up.' So we bring them from very low down up to where they can shine after three years.*

Louise echoes the sentiment that the value-added dimension which the university provides, expressed in the personal and academic transformation of students, is empowering for both academics and students:

> *We pay academics poorly compared to any other institution, and yet people still want to be here. There is something that happens here at this place between students' first year and their final year that makes them change. I've seen it so many times. A very insecure person comes in here, and at the end of that day the person is cracking a genome here…This is world class research and those were students who were not supposed to make it.*

The quality of the student intake at UWC was largely recognised by the academics as being less than optimal in terms of what is required for success at university. Academics believed that, through their efforts, through a strong focus on teaching and academic development and intense personal interactions with students, UWC was able to graduate students of suitable and even exceptional quality. They expressed their frustration when quality evaluation focused on efficiency indicators and failed to measure the value added by UWC. This was especially so in comparison with other institutions that were able to produce better results, having chosen to work with students who were far better prepared for higher education.

5.4.1. The public good as value-added

An interesting dimension of quality as transformation was provided by a number of interviewees, who argued, implicitly, that the recipients of a university education should be alerted by their mentors to the political need to ensure that society in general should benefit from their university education. The notion of public good refers here to the purpose and benefits of a university education.

In the view of some academics, the role of education should be to equip graduates with the knowledge and skills required to contribute to society, to social change, and to promote and enhance the well-being of others. The view of quality as public good therefore goes beyond notions of transformation as personal development and upliftment.

In introducing the concept of quality as promoting 'public good', Bulelwa raised the interesting 'paradox' of quality as adding value, when she said that:

> *I think about what excellence is …You can have somebody who is a high achiever but who actually doesn't function well in society or the world of work. But you can be excellent in terms of that traditional definition. For me, that well-roundedness is about…the moulding of a well-rounded citizen. Somebody who … is tolerant, who is critical, who is compassionate, who contributes and wants to contribute to society and the well-being of society in whatever field they find themselves in and where the public good plays a part…I think in South Africa tertiary education is a luxury and having been given that opportunity I think you should contribute towards the public good in some way.*

Bulelwa suggests that the definition of quality as value-added, although clearly residing within a broader understanding of quality as transformation, also incorporates other elements, most notably that of quality as excellence. Harvey and Green (1993) label this dimension of quality, Excellence 1 (Exceeding High Standards).

This paradox of defining quality as value-added is explained as follows by Harvey and Green (1993):

> *Quality as transformation involves a curious paradox because it is also equated with the exceptional. Empowerment and value-added notions of quality lead us back to Excellence 1, to 'doing the right things well.' For an excellent institution is surely one that adds most value to the student or empowers the student for life after college (1993: 25).*

The contradiction referred to by Harvey and Green, and hinted at by some interviewees, resides in the use of the concept of excellence in defining quality. While excellence is largely associated with the exceptional, in what has elsewhere been termed 'gold standard' or 'zero defect,' excellence also refers to 'doing the right things well.' In the reality of UWC, and probably that of many other institutions, doing the right things well, such as granting access to students ill-prepared for university, often stands in opposition to achieving exceptionally high standards of academic performance.

This contradiction in the discourse of excellence is explored by many interviewees. Nina, for instance, argues for a reconfiguration of the notion of excellence to include a conceptualisation of 'public good' which incorporates values such as caring for and promoting the well-being of others:

> *To me, excellence is if an institution puts a person out there who has the knowledge and has the skills but also has the added dimension, something that you can't measure. That ...* (I translate from Afrikaans here) *there is more to the person than simply what they are able to do and…… what they know. It's another dimension, not surpassing by being better at what you are supposed to do, but … being enthusiastic and feeling and caring. It's about getting a person out there who doesn't want to just earn money and get the big car but wants to make things better for whoever is on the receiving end of their services.*

Harold elaborates on the notion of public good by suggesting that a quality education should be one which produces graduates who are able to think critically and challenge the social order:

> *I believe that … if education is to be of value then it must prepare you… to become a change agent in society, who is more effective because of what I teach, and can help our economy operate differently. We should be training people to be change agents by educating people to become activists who can cause trouble in society.*

The following comment by Harold follows immediately on his remarks that relate quality to producing intellectual activists.

> *What worries me about this university is the absence of debate about anything – that's what I said earlier about becoming more and more conservative – the progressives have abandoned us and we have a whole new ethos in this place.*

Harold laments what he views as UWC's retreat from its earlier position as 'Home of the Left', leading the struggle for democracy through intellectual and other forms of activism. He further describes what he terms a trend towards conservatism emerging at UWC, and identifies the absence of debate as the key indicator, contrasting this strongly with the university's outspoken critique of government during the years of struggle.

Subscribing to a notion of quality as public good, as described in this section, appears to symbolise a desire to re-assert the idea of UWC as contributing to social transformation.

The academics referred to in this section interpreted 'public good' as developing citizenship, encouraging social critique, and promoting social activism. They thereby linked quality as transformation to a political understanding of the role and purpose of a university education.

5.4.2. Contesting the value-added

The data revealed diverse opinions amongst academics and managers alike regarding the impact of the student intake on the academic project. The above discussion of quality as value-added has highlighted the argument that it was precisely this, the characteristics of the student intake, which provided the unique richness of engagement UWC was able to have with its students. Others, however, felt strongly that the academic standing and quality of UWC was being compromised by the ongoing commitment to students such as these.

Interestingly, some interviewees felt that the University of the Western Cape had been stereotyped with regard to its intake for far too long, and that it needed to break from this public image of itself as the university which admitted those who were rejected by other institutions. University managers in particular worked hard to persuade the public, the state and donors that UWC excelled at more than just granting access to the educationally disadvantaged.

The debate around UWC and its niche as a university which excels at inclusion is essential to understanding contestation within the university, between those, mainly academics, who are happy to be associated with the pursuit of equity through promoting access and inclusion, and those, mainly senior managers, who prefer to portray UWC as having the potential to be regionally, nationally and globally competitive, able to attract and graduate amongst the best students both in South Africa and the world.

Jack, a senior administrator, attempted to construct an argument for the need to locate the university's aspirations towards excellence within the reality of the quality task confronting academics:

> *Excellence to me has to mean in relation to … the range of students we have at UWC, not in relation to some other students that we wish we had or that other people have... Our excellence has to be based on the relationship that we have with the actual students that we are dealing with. Obviously within that there are debates about minimum standards for admission and those are ongoing debates. But it's the quality of the engagement with the actual situation that must be part of our definition of excellence.*

Jack suggests that 'doing the right thing' requires that the university recognise, and work to improve, the quality of its current students, who reflect a specific range of academic capabilities, rather than defining quality in aspirational terms alone.

Albert speaks passionately about his work with under-prepared students, and is somewhat critical about attempts within UWC to downplay this particular aspect of its identity:

> Some people think that the university wants to portray itself as a Mercedes Benz when it is actually more of a Corolla. But my view is that … we can actually be proud of what we do … We turn people who might otherwise have been outcasts into huge successes...You want to be recognised as an institution, and it's simple. You just look at where these kids come from. They come with a very basic Matric pass, they come from… economically backward and deprived homes and they leave here… and get appointed into top jobs that demand high levels of skills.

The comments by Jack and Albert should be viewed in the context of UWC's preparation of its self-evaluation report for the HEQC's 2007 institutional audit. The self-evaluation presented a portrayal of the university as a place which was able to attract students of exceptional quality. Many academics argued that the depiction of UWC's quality as exceptional failed to reflect the reality of its student population, and instead focused on the aspiration or promise of future quality.

Albert's reference to two makes of motor vehicles, one quite ordinary, the other outstanding, suggests that denying the reality of its students serves to negate the university's real achievements of quality.

While some academics argued that UWC's understanding of quality should revolve around the successes of its educationally disadvantaged students, others felt that accepting unprepared students had a negative impact on the achievement of high standards. Caroline expressed her view of this debate as follows:

> I would go for excellence but I know that's not politically correct here. I feel, let us know when someone has passed something that they are satisfying those criteria. Not that they've had six chances and a back door thing to get in and continuous evaluation. But what I think is happening here is fitness for purpose. Because UWC has a mission to uplift the previously educationally disadvantaged.

I probed Caroline's conceptualisation of the relationship between fitness for purpose and excellence, by asking:

> *Do you think you can do that, uplift the previously educationally disadvantaged, while maintaining excellence?*

Caroline responded by arguing for a notion of excellence that was related to high standards, but in her view was out of reach of most UWC students:

> *No, you can't. 'Cause those students can't do research, for example. You can get them to a certain level but if you're going to sit with them doing research, you'll be writing it. So that's not excellence. And they don't speak well, so they can't go on an international forum…. Well, I fail those who I really battle to understand. But a lot of people don't, so they won't reach excellence.*

While Jack and Albert argued for a redefinition of the concept of quality to include the value-added, or the transformations achieved under challenging circumstances, Caroline bemoaned the impact on quality of accepting under-prepared students:

> *I think the actual standard of the students has dropped … you're including people who you wouldn't have included 10 years ago, and you're encouraging them to pass, so in that way the quality has dropped. And I think it's inevitable. Because you're starting off with something that's of a lower level. You can improve that level, but you can't make it as good as if you chose a much higher level to start with.*

I quote at length from Caroline's interview since she expressed a view so divergent from the rest. She was the only person who problematised the mission of UWC and declared the university's mission-directed notion of quality as working against the achievement of quality as excellence, arguing that the two notions of quality - as fitness for purpose, or the achievement of equity, and as excellence - in that situation and in that place were so incommensurate as to make them completely incompatible.

Although her expression of the tension between fitness for purpose and excellence as conceptualisations of quality is very memorable, it alerts one to aspects of the data which suggest that many interviewees experienced discomfort with the notion of quality as excellence. Some problematised excellence and its association with externally-devised standards of performance and questioned the suitability of the concept for UWC's particular situation and context.

5.5. Quality as moving from HBU to excellence

Harvey and Green (1993) identify a number of different understandings and approaches embedded within the notion of quality as exceptional. First, there is the traditional notion of exclusiveness and élite quality, usually associated with the view that quality needs no pinning down – one knows it when one sees it. Second is the notion of quality as excellence, or as exceeding very high standards. Thirdly, there is exceptional quality seen as exceeding minimum standards.

Central to the understanding of quality as exceptional, in all three ways described above, is an acceptance of the idea that at some level standards exist, and that in the case of a good university education these are immutable, universal and objective - hence the 'gold standard' approach to quality, against which standard institutional performance can be measured, enabling comparisons across different institutions (Harvey and Green 1993).

The HEQC and the DOE of South Africa tried exceedingly hard in these first few decades of quality assuring institutions to rationalise an approach to quality measurement that involved standardising quality assessment across all universities, irrespective of their history, context or circumstances. All universities are now measured by the same rule, with benchmarks, performance indicators, targets and other standards of performance applied equally across the entire terrain of the higher education system.

Is it possible? Can it work? Could we have a uniform system of quality assessment in South Africa? This question was central to the conversations of many interviewees, as they grappled with often contradictory ideas. UWC's desire to be regarded as one of the best universities, both in South Africa and in Africa at large, jostled with the opposing notion that it was 'madness' to expect the university, given its history of neglect by the apartheid state, to perform comparably with universities which did not share that history.

Thabo, a senior executive manager, sums up the contradiction and dilemma faced by the institution as it positions itself to take up the challenge of transition, from historically disadvantaged institution to excellence:

Now when I look as the national framework with respect to their expectations of higher education institutions, I find it quite appalling because I would have thought… that there would have been a far greater understanding of the differences between these different institutions in this country. They've got a benchmark of at least 80% first year passes. How can we possibly have UCT and Stellenbosch and UWC and Fort Hare 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.

Yet earlier in the interview Thabo spoke of UWC as needing to compete on an equal footing with all South African universities:

Speaking about this university and the role it must play in this country…. It must shine. It must contest with those historically white institutions on their own terms, not in terms of, 'Well, we're a poor historically black institution.' We must say that because of our energy, just because of who we are … we'll play that game with you … whatever it takes.

The position described by Thabo became more serious and moved beyond the confines of mere rhetoric on the occasion of the presentation to the university of the DOE's official profile of UWC, prepared for the institutional audit and designed to contextualise the work the audit team performed during this assessment process.

At that time, senior managers in the university made public their dissatisfaction and took exception to the DOE framing UWC throughout as a historically disadvantaged institution; I quote Don:

When they came to see us, they said, 'We are so interested because you are the first of the historically black institutions that is going to be investigated.' So we said, 'Can we say right away that we don't see ourselves as an HBU… for these reasons, and we ask you to take this seriously… They were a bit shocked … And they got a profile drawn up and the profile did exactly what we feared. It just placed us in relation to HBUs… The notion of quality which is needed in South Africa... is… how is this place doing in relation to Stellenbosch University and the University of Cape Town… That notion was not there.

Elsewhere in this thesis I use the word schizophrenia to describe the nature of this contradiction in a way that frames the inconsistency as a case of ongoing identity construction. An institution in transition, at least in the minds of its leadership, UWC vacillates constantly between two portrayals of itself, one as historically disadvantaged, and hence entitled to diverse forms of compensation, and the other as a successful university that has been able to 'ditch' its HDI label and enter a new race for excellence.

Thabo insightfully hints at this schizophrenic identity when he likens the dilemma to that of the three kings in T.S. Eliot's `Journey of the Magi':

> *People in this university find themselves in an invidious position because in a sense they're almost like T.S.Eliot's Magi. They're leaving the one and they're making contact with the other, but they're still part of the one that they are leaving … as they move into a new space. And how do they hold onto their linkage to the one while moving into whatever else the demands may be? And so you are by definition in contestation with your culture.*

Conversations with senior managers hinted at an ongoing struggle to find a resolution of certain inconsistencies, related to the university adopting different representations of itself to suit different circumstances. In this regard, its claims to excellence were directed at gaining attention and attracting rewards (Wangenge-Ouma and Langa, 2010), while claims to a past of neglect as an HBU were directed at obtaining compensation and special consideration. At times, the university asserted its right to be regarded as equal in quality to HWU's, and at other times it demanded that quality judgements make allowance for its history as an HBU.

5.5.1.   Excellence as aspirational

Adopting the notion of excellence as aspirational, as UWC's leadership tends to do, signals to the more cynical a notion of quality that is not yet quite as it should be, although the university would like people to believe that it is indeed capable of making the leap towards the exceptional. Legend has it that one member of the 2007 HEQC audit team, in a meeting with a group of senior management at UWC, expressed her annoyance at the continuous articulation of the aspirational and declared something along the lines of, '*Stop telling us what you hope to become. Tell us about the quality of this institution right now.'*

Senior executive managers interviewed often articulated the aspirational dimension of quality as excellence by drawing analogies with game-playing and other sporting metaphors. Some spoke of 'knowing the rules of the game,' others talked about 'being in the race,' and some referred to quality in post-apartheid higher education as being a race with 'new starting and end points.'

Thabo used the example of preparing a team to participate in world-class soccer to compare the notion of world-class soccer demanding the exceptional with the process UWC would need to go through to achieve excellence:

There is a thing called world cup level soccer... you recognise it by looking at teams that play there. If you wish to play at that level you must understand what the world cup soccer culture is … and you must aspire to it … and you must do what is necessary to acquire it ...The challenge is to ask oneself … what are your aspirations? Having asked and answered that question, you now ask, 'Where are we relative to what we believe our levels of competence with respect to this aspect of our lives ought to be?' And how do you know that? Well, look to see who in your estimation is playing the game at those levels and see where you are relative to them. And then if you still aspire to be with them, ask, 'What is the space and how do we fill the space?'

Thabo used the metaphor of playing a game to demonstrate his view that the institution needed to identify its quality goals, and then act to ensure that it reached these goals. His rhetoric suggests a subtle understanding of the game-playing that is associated with making claims to excellence which often do not reflect the institution's reality. At the same time, his use of language seems to reflect a pragmatic hope that casting excellence as aspirational in this way could serve to inspire real quality improvement.

5.5.2. Tracing the roots of the aspirational

The notion of excellence as aspirational was described by some interviewees as emerging at a particularly troubled time in UWC's history, during the period from 1998 to about 2003. Briefly, the DOE's 2002 report on restructuring the higher education system through mergers and incorporations (DOE, 2002a) recommended the merger of UWC with the neighbouring technikon, a move signaling that the university would cease to exist beyond the apartheid era.

Jack, who joined the university a few short years before the release of this report (CHE: 2002a), traces UWC's difficulties back to 1999, when all higher education institutions were called upon to submit strategic planning documents, called three-year rolling plans. UWC's submission simply did not make the grade, resulting in a huge pressure on the institution to improve or face closure.

Jack explains:

> *There was a real sense that the university had to change, that it was just so second rate or third rate in so many areas of its activity… In 1999… we started working on the three-year rolling plan and the strategic plan for the university. I went to a workshop around this planning process … and all the HDIs were there. There was a sense that HDIs were a problem, that they were places of poor quality, that they didn't know how to do things. The focus of the discussion was the rolling plans which had been submitted by this institution. It was widely believed … that UWC's was the very worst out of all the rolling plans... That people had just strung together bits and pieces cut and pasted from documents... It was a sense that we had to stop being an HDI and we had to actually become a decent university or else we were going under. And the possibility of going under was very real. There was a sense that if we continued to submit documentation like that to the DOE that we would have no future … they were taking that as an indicator of an institution in a very bad state.*

The notion of an HDI in trouble entering the twenty-first century provided a challenge out of which arose, under a new Vice Chancellor, a formulation of the future '*aspirational trajectory'* of UWC. It was not a description of the university's reality at the time, but what emerged from this '*hugely dispirited institution'* after 2002 was `*a story of its future that was so dazzling. …. that they* (funders and the state) *caught the story... that here is an aspiration that must be supported'* (From Thabo's interview).

In the same way that the 'dazzling story' emerged from the narrow escape from closure, so this reprieve had an impact on quality, as Kenneth, lecturer in Political Studies, recalls:

> *These concerns* (the increased activity around quality assurance) *have spread across South Africa and UWC is just going with the tide. The advantage of it … is that it puts beyond all reasonable doubt the quality of our exit standards and degrees if we do get any sneers or put downs… from the ivory towers of UCT, Stellenbosch, Wits, Pretoria and so on. And the famous merger report of 2002 has suggested … that there wasn't so much a need for UWC to compete with two outstanding 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 more mindful…that you've got to deliver the goods.*

In 2002, UWC was able to persuade the state, through appeals to its potential for excellence, that it should be allowed to continue to exist independently. Kenneth hints at the predicament which resulted from having won a reprieve, that UWC would be required to demonstrate unequivocally to the state and the public that it deserved to be regarded as a university of quality. The implications of this obligation for academics, especially with regard to quality assurance processes and their expectations, are examined in the next chapter.

5.5.3. Problematising excellence

One way of problematising the notion of quality as excellence was proposed by Jack, who argued for the existence of a pluralistic notion of quality, one which would be cognisant of the reality of the student intake while not excluding the possibility of excellence:

> *We are operating in a country which is the most unequal in the world…The question then is … how are we responsive and who are we talking about? Excellence is not an abstract, ideal notion... It's saying, in that context, what is excellence? It's saying … we are going to respond as well as possible to the situation that we are faced with. But … there is no reason why we cannot have individuals who do achieve the highest ranks of excellence measured according to international benchmarks…We won't though have the mass of our students or staff attaining that kind of excellence …. That is impossible. But we can have a broad notion of excellence where we deal in the best possible manner with the situation that we are actually faced with. That's a notion of excellence to me. And it does mean we've got to live with that spread … the minimum standards and the high end as well.*

Louise, a Science professor, echoes this view, but from the perspective of the academic, as she describes quality as excellence and quality as 'mopping up' almost as two sides of the same coin:

> *The kind of student who comes into this university – they say it's about excellence – (but) it feels like you're mopping up all the time. Traditionally we have serviced the student who does not do that well at school. They get in here and generally people see it as a mopping up exercise. But then… something unlocks for that student and they do very well and go out to do research and they excel. You get that happening and this is where the excellence and the mopping up sort of work hand in hand. It's not just about mopping up… It's when the students get the right support they do well. So there's an element of mopping up there but there is also an element of excellence that's emerging from that.*

For some academics, it is not enough to acknowledge that quality as exceptional should not be the only definition of quality pursued by UWC. Instead, they further reject the idea of the university buying into a standardised notion of quality as 'gold standard', arguing that such an act would be accompanied by great loss, the surrender of core values, and a dilution of the social justice dimension of UWC's historic mission.

Susan, a visiting professor in the Arts Faculty, believes that UWC's move towards adopting the excellence and standards approach to quality (Harvey and Green, 1993) will challenge and ultimately destroy UWC's historic identity as a critical agent of social change:

> *There's lots of misunderstandings around the word quality. If I walk around this campus I see so many interesting people doing interesting things…I'm surrounded with people who can actually profoundly change the country… And I find it pathetic* (treurig*) that we are being despised by other universities because we are not there with them and they have made these standards, when in actual fact the work that is being done here is so much more important than anything they can dream of.*

> *And I find it a great pity that before 1994, this university couldn't give a damn about what Wits and UCT and Stellenbosch thought about this business of excellence. This was a university that said we're part of a community and our focus is this community. After 1994, suddenly now the new government has totally bought into what the grand universities have said quality is.*

> *And because there's a formulation in this country of what excellence is and there's a place where excellence is being measured you can actually do nothing but now also strive for that. And I know that there have been a lot of things that have been given up by this university as a result.*

Susan views this transition with a sense of loss and thinly-disguised anger, but with an acceptance of the inevitable, realising that UWC has little choice but to compete with other institutions against external standards of achievement.

These standards are largely measures of performance output determined by the state, and include areas such as research output through accredited publications and teaching output measured by student success and time to degree.

5.6. Concluding words

The data has indicated that a range of different views about what quality is and how it should be improved exists at UWC, especially in relation to working with students. Different opinions about academic standards, admission requirements and the quality of graduates were expressed by interviewees. My own sense is that these issues of quality and its improvement, including student quality, are thrust into stark relief in situations of quality evaluation.

This applies in the case of internal academic reviews, but even more so when academics from outside the institution serve on review panels, as for example during the crucial 2006 external audit, conducted by an HEQC-appointed review panel.

To illustrate this point, I present below a discussion held during the HEQC audit in a session about quality. As a member of the university group called into this audit session, I was able to observe the discussion and also attempted to make notes, as accurately as I could under the circumstances.

In this exchange, two rather difficult questions about quality and standards were asked by members of the HEQC audit panel:

> ### HEQC Question:
>
> *A concern with throughput is evident in your university's self-evaluation report…Have you considered improving … selection criteria for admission?*
>
> ### UWC Respondent:
>
> *We talk about it all the time. We talk about equity as well as merit. We look at the intake – for example if the number of African students is down, then we look at it from that perspective. This is a complex issue that is monitored all the time and debated annually and we look at the demographic profile of students. Admissions impact on professions. If we go on merit, we can end up with only white dentists. We understand these equity issues – and there is a tension about this in the university. Making those choices requires intervention. We take those that qualify, not just those with As and Bs (in the school-leaving exam). We see ourselves as serving broader society.*

The respondent reveals the tension at UWC between those who prefer a notion of quality which is embedded in the pursuit of equity and those who pursue a context-free notion of quality as excellence, in terms of high standards.

The HEQC's questions convey their reservations about whether quality indeed exists at UWC, and the second question casts doubt on the usefulness of accepting multiple understandings of quality.

> ### HEQC Question:
>
> *There seem to be different definitions of quality - as excellence, as fitness for purpose etc in the university. It must be difficult to juggle all perspectives into the system. How do you it in practice?*

UWC Respondent 1:

We have taken continuous improvement and high service delivery as our common definition of quality and we measure against that.

UWC Respondent 2:

We need different notions of quality. If we only take excellence, we leave things out. There are minimum standards that are expected and we do check on those. Quality is for everybody.

The questions put by members of the audit panel were challenging ones, asked as they were from the perspective of those who saw excellence through the standards-based lens. The discomfort and even annoyance felt by the respondents was palpable, as was the scepticism with which members of the audit panel received the responses. Indeed, the issue of multiple definitions of quality existing within the university was one which the panel found highly problematic and which was referred to at length in the Audit Report.

More importantly, the responses of the two UWC staff members, both quality managers, reflected the existence of competing positions with regard to quality even at the level of quality management, where some uniformity of approach would usually be expected.

This research has shown that on an almost daily basis people in the institution are confronted by diverse views of quality. Different levels in the institutions' hierarchy are associated with different notions of what quality is and how it ought to be improved.

Later discussion will reinforce the fact that academics and managers, for the most part, prefer different views of quality, and that this serves to account in large measure for the emergence of tension and conflict around quality policy implementation within the University of the Western Cape.

Finally, I think the following quotation by Susan identifies the presence of the political in quality and quality assessment, echoing Morley's (2003) sentiment that the norms and common-sense understandings often associated with the business of quality serve to disguise how power works.

> *I would re-define excellence… or ask questions about who is defining excellence. For me excellence lies in what you can contribute to make this a better world…*
> *I mean, I can sit here and write a very good poem that three people would understand and it would change their lives and it would be an excellent poem, which has its place. But all my life I've said that even if I write one poem that helps someone at a political rally for three seconds to feel… pride in himself, it's just as valid as a poem that survives hundreds of years. So, I think … one should not be vague about what excellence is. You should ask questions. Who defines excellence? And you should campaign for the right that you may define what excellence is for your university, in your country, in your area.*

Some interviewees attempted to identify the constituencies in higher education in the post-apartheid era that possessed the power to decide what the 'gold standard' of quality would be. The neighbouring historically white institutions, UCT and Stellenbosch University, were often referred to in a way which suggested that the quality concepts embedded in their experiences and practices had come to dominate the state's idea of quality. UCT and Stellenbosch University were framed by interviewees as historically well-resourced, sought after and able to select high-performing students, mainly from families who understood the value of a university education and who had sufficient resources to finance their children's education.

Understandably, many of those interviewed expressed their frustration that the state expected UWC, which continued to attract the poor and under-prepared, and still struggled with the historic deprivation of resources, to measure up to the same standards.

The following chapter will present further findings by addressing the following sub-question: How do competing conceptions of quality relate to academics' attitudes towards the implementation of quality assurance policy and processes?