QUALITY REVIEWS

IN

SERVICE AND SUPPORT UNITS:

VALUE ADDED?

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to report on a qualitative investigation to identify and explore:
- the value added by quality reviews in service and support units in the UJ;
- improvements to the review process to enhance the value added, and
- differences in the role players' experiences.

Five service and support units were included in the research project and three key role players from each unit were interviewed. The responses on the value added were categorised and then organised into two sections, namely value added to:
- the functioning of the unit, i.e. understanding the bigger picture, identifying gaps for improvement and collaboration with other units;
- the staff in the unit, i.e. teambuilding, the identification of strengths, the feeling of pride and an increase in quality awareness.

Improvements to increase the value were identified as generic across the units, i.e. evidence management, workload and self-evaluation report writing, but also unit-specific responses.

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1.   CONTEXT

The University of Johannesburg (UJ) in South Africa (SA) was established in 2005, through a merger of an established technikon and a university. It has a student population of approximately 50 000 students, based on four geographically separated campuses.

A cycle of quality reviews in the University includes different units of analysis, namely:
- in faculties, programmes and/or individual modules and/or academic departments are reviewed.
- service and support divisions are reviewed, either as a whole division or as individual units.

The focus of this paper is on the quality reviews in service and support units.

2.   PURPOSE OF THE PAPER

The extensive nature and financial costs of quality reviews, gave rise to questions on the value added. A support unit such as the Unit for Quality Promotion (UQP) are the custodians of the process, and they have to facilitate the process in such a way that improvement (as value added) can be achieved.

The purpose of this paper is to report on a qualitative investigation to identify and explore:
- the value added by the quality reviews of service and support units in the UJ;
- improvements to the review process to enhance the value added by the reviews.

3.   CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK
3.1   Value

A review of the literature indicates that more attention has been paid to value added by quality reviews in the core function of universities – teaching and learning. Thus, much of the literature deals with quality management in academic faculties, while neglecting quality management in service and support units (Houston, 2008; Fourie, 2000; Luckett, 2007; Savickiene, 2006, Selesho, 2008; Strydom, 2000; Wilkinson, 2003).

A quality management system comprising of internal self-evaluation and external peer review has been associated with benefits (in academic faculties and departments) such as:
- A strengthening of "professional competencies by encouraging new forms of teamwork and collaboration" (Kleijnen et al, 2011).
- Providing "ownership of the evaluation process to those who must deal with issues of quality" (Jonathan, 2000).

- Enhancing "people's commitment to quality improvement where deficiencies have been identified" (Jonathan, 2000).

Studies have indicated that this method "can be a powerful instrument of improvement" (Van Kemenade & Hardjono, 2010) in the academic sphere. This research project uses this tenet as a springboard to investigate whether quality reviews do add value to service and support units.

Value added, for the purpose of this research project, has been conceptualised primarily as improvement. Keeping in mind the benefits of the self-evaluation and peer review process as described above, as well as the potential of such a process to facilitate improvement, interview questions were developed with the following aims:

- To elicit the benefits and negative aspects of the self-evaluation and peer review process;
- To identify whether this process led to improvement;
- To identify whether respondents viewed the process as one that adds value.

3.2 Quality

Quality in SA higher education (CHE, 2004) is defined as:

- fitness of purpose and fitness for purpose;
- an ongoing process, and
- transformation imperatives.

Within the context of the UJ, quality is not seen as an objective in itself, but is aimed at the identification and addressing of gaps to ensure a continuous and integrated cycle of planning action, monitoring, review and improvement with a view to effecting improvements (UJ Quality Promotion Policy, 2008).

3.3 Quality reviews

The following key elements of a quality review process in the UJ are listed below:

- An evidence-based self-evaluation report (SER) of the unit by applying national criteria customised for the UJ.
- A site visit by a peer review panel.
- A peer review report to the unit, followed by an improvement plan (developed by the unit) to be approved by the management structures, but also the Senate sub-committees.
- Annual progress reports on the implementation of the improvement plan.
- Support is provided by the institutional Unit for Quality Promotion.

3.4 Service and support divisions (and units)

Service and support divisions refer to all units outside academic faculties that provide services and support to faculties in the areas of teaching and learning, research and community engagement (the core functions of the UJ) and include academic development of staff and students.

The 15 service and support divisions in the UJ consist of about 40 units, mostly active on four campuses. These divisions can be arranged on a continuum of diversity, ranging from Academic Development and Support (most staff members are academics) to Protection

Services (most staff members are non-academic). This diversity also influences the support needed during the review process.

4. DATA COLLECTION

Data were collected by means of individual interviews. In each unit, the following key role players were interviewed:

- Chairperson of the internal steering committee (usually the head of the unit) responsible for managing the unit's preparations for the quality review.
- The SER writer and member of the steering committee.
- A staff member who is not a member of the steering committee, but one of the interviewees during the review panel's site visit.

The following units were included in this investigation:

UNITS	STATUS OF REVIEW	Additional information
A. Manages and supports sport in the University	Completed up to second progress report.	• Used an external SER writer.
B. Psycho-educational, therapeutic, academic and career counselling, etc.	Completed up to second progress report.	• Started with an internal SER writer, but switched to an external writer.
C. Academic development	Currently developing their improvement plan.	• Internal writer as principal writer with different staff members contributing to the SER. • Chairperson not the head of the unit.
D. Student accommodation	Incomplete; busy with the development of the SER.	• Used an external SER writer.
E. Financial services	Incomplete; busy with the development of the SER.	• Used an internal SER writer.

Table 1: Units included in the research project.

Interview questions focused on key elements in the quality reviews, namely:

- The expectations of the unit going into the review.
- The benefits of, and negative experiences, linked to the development of the SER and evidence management.
- The positive and negative experiences linked to the site visit.
- The impact of the peer review report.
- The value of the improvement plan.
- The overall value of the quality review
- Proposals to improve the process to add (more) value.

5.   DATA ANALYSIS

The analysis of the responses was done independently by the three researchers, with regular consultations. The analyses were done as follows:

- Firstly, *responses* to questions were labelled (per question) across all the different units and across the three respondents. Similar responses were labelled and clustered as categories. Categories were then integrated under (i) value added and (ii) negative experiences (see *Findings* below).
- Secondly, *responses* by the three key role players were compared to identify differences (see *Differences* below).

6.   FINDINGS

The categories of responses are organised into different sets of findings below:

6.1   Value added

The following categories of responses were identified across the units:

(a)   Teambuilding in the unit

An unintended outcome of the reviews, in many units, was the establishment of a strong team.

(b)   Identify staff strengths and weaknesses

The chairpersons identified the individual strengths of staff members. People stepped forward, people who were not expect to do so. They also identified the lack of certain skills in the unit.

(c)   Understanding the bigger picture

The development of an understanding of the bigger picture, including a better understanding of what their colleagues (especially on other campuses) are doing, was mentioned.

(d)   Identify gaps and improve

This process started with the development of the SER and continued after the peer review report was received. The units critically engaged with the report to ensure that all the recommendations were addressed in an improvement plan. The peer review report provided direction, also w.r.t. differences of opinion in the unit. The report provided affirmation for what the unit is doing right. It forced them to look at things differently and was regarded as a "very big, long-term benefit".

(e)   Credibility of the peer review panel

The units indicated that the credibility of the panel was very important. One chairperson indicated that they had a very strict panel and that it resulted in an in-depth review of the unit. A good peer review report is enhanced by the trust in the panel of experts.

(f)   Staff felt proud to be in this unit

A good peer review report had a positive impact on the staff. People felt very proud to work in a particular unit. The unit's status in the University was also affected by the report: the unit looked good which reflected well on the University.

(g) *Awareness of quality*

The value added and positive experience the respondents had, resulted in statements that these reviews should be done regularly. Some of the staff members became aware of quality and that it is the responsibility of everyone. Although not strictly speaking the focus of this research project, it was interesting to note that some panel members went back to their institutions to request a peer review of their unit, because of their perception of the value it adds. This can be interpreted as adding to the perceptions of the staff on the value of the reviews.

(h) *Support in the unit and in the university*

Collaboration with other service and support units was experienced. The support provided by the Unit for Quality Promotion was also mentioned. Line managers up to the deputy-vice chancellor supported some units in their preparations.

6.2 Negative experiences

The negative experiences were also identified as areas in need of improvement. These improvements may contribute to an enhancement of the value added by reviews.

6.2.1 Negative experiences *in the majority of units*

(a) *Evidence collection*

Some units experienced a lack of cooperation in this regard: the principle writer was supposed to get information from the evidence managers who were struggling to find the information. Often the evidence did not exist or no organised system of evidence existed. Merger dynamics still had a negative impact on the collaboration in some units.

Although identified as a negative aspect, "the negative was actually the positive". The absence of a complete and organised system of evidence was identified early in the process and addressed. Some then regarded the establishment of a system of evidence as a long-term benefit.

(b) *SER writing was a cognitive challenge*

Analysing the criteria and applying it to the functions of the unit were challenging. Lack of capacity in the staff component to develop a coherent narrative was experienced. This was sometimes identified *before* the writing started and external writers were appointed. The fact that the SER was written in English, often not the SER writer's first language, added to the problem.

(c) *Workload and time consuming*

People were resentful in the beginning, because it involved more meetings and additional work.

6.2.2 Negative experiences *in individual units*

The following findings can be linked to individual units. They are included here, because they do reflect the variety of experiences – often linked to the unit-specific context – that have to be addressed.

(a)   Logistical matters
One unit took the panel to all five sites of service delivery on four campuses, including formal interviews, as well as observations of staff at work where a mere observation of infrastructure is required. Logistics included road transport, refreshments, lunches, cooler bags with water and snacks, etc. The negative experience was worsened by one panel member's critical response, e.g. she complained that the car in which they were driven from the guesthouse to the campuses was below her status, etc.

(b)   Poached UJ staff
In one unit, some of the panel members poached UJ staff - two staff members were offered jobs at two other SA universities by two of the panel members. The positive report this unit received worked against them: "when those high flying psychologists in the country look for staff, they look at [this unit]".

(c)   Competitive edge
A unit that competes with similar units from other universities (e.g. for students) gave the response that the panel had access to their inside information and that it may have a negative effect on their competitive edge.

(d)   Responses misconstrued
There were one or two instances where staff members' responses were slightly misconstrued by the peer review panel. The unit, however, put a positive spin on it: they became aware of how staff members sometimes portray themselves. It was discussed internally to ensure that staff members understand the functions of the unit and that they are working within their scope of practice.

(e)   Not enough time
Some staff members felt that the interviews during the site visit were too short, that they were being hurried and that important things were not discussed. They also complained that there were too many interviews which left little time for the panel to study the evidence.

(f)   Debriefing sessions
A panel made negative remarks about the debriefing sessions (i.e. the completion of a short questionnaire) after each interview. They were concerned that the interviewees would tell the next group what the panel's line of enquiry was.

(g)   Financial matters
In one unit where a new SER writer had to be appointed (± 6 weeks before the site visit), the director had to use money out of her personal research fund to pay him. This was queried by the unit's board of governance.

(h)   Student involvement
One unit who works with students mentioned the involvement of students as a concern: "the only group that really cannot be involved continuously is the students, because they come in and they move out". They also referred to the students' evaluation of their services as problematic. (The students are, however, involved as interviewees during the site visit.)

(j)   ***Hesitation to be open and honest***
One unit commented that they experienced a hesitation by staff members to come forward and speak their minds during the development of the SER. "People are very careful in what they say because they do not want to step on people's toes or they do not want to create negativity in the process".

6.3   Differences between role players' responses
In this section the differences in responses by the chair persons, SER writers and staff members have been identified:

Focus	Chairpersons	SER writers	Staff members
Involvement in quality review process.	Spoke less than SER writers about quality review process.	Spoke at length about quality review process.	Commented that they were not involved in several aspects of the quality review process.
Approach to quality review process.	Saw the quality review process mainly as an opportunity to identify gaps and implement improvements.	Review process seen as one of support and collaboration in the unit.	Review process seen as one of support and collaboration in the unit.
Difficulties experienced during review process.	*	Experienced a lack of cooperation and support within the unit, and a lack of organised information and evidence as a stumbling block.	*
View on affirmation and support.	*	Found the review process to be much more affirming than other groups. Also identified support from UQP as more important, and seem to value it more, when compared to other groups.	*
Merger and staff issues.	Merger and staff issues are a focus point for chairpersons.	*	*

* No common response within group.
Table 2: Differences in responses

7.   CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS
The conclusions and recommendations are presented according to the sets of findings:

7.1   Value added
The credibility of the panel seems to be a key factor that could have a positive or a negative influence on the perceived value added. This aspect should be carefully managed by the steering committee, but also by UQP who is responsible for clear guidelines on the

composition of the panel, etc. The selection (i.e. individual members' expertise, experience, etc.) and approval of the panel members by the line management is crucial.

The categories of value added can be regrouped as value to:

- The functioning of the unit, i.e. understanding the bigger picture and identifying gaps (including lack of skills) for improvement, as well as their collaboration with other units. These responses are expected, as this was the purpose of the review.
- The staff in the unit, i.e. the teambuilding, the identification of strengths, the feeling of pride and an increase in the awareness of quality. These responses were unexpected, and are an added benefit to conducting the reviews as staff development has occurred.

The value added in terms of teambuilding and understanding the bigger picture is exceptionally valuable in a diverse and multi-campus institution, especially after a merger. It can happen quite easily that the separate sub-units work in isolation. Teamwork can only be achieved if collaboration is stressed from the beginning of the review process.

It was also noted that some units interpreted a negative experience as a learning experience (e.g. the misunderstandings that crept in during interviews), but also as long term benefits (e.g. the absence of a system of evidence). This can be perceived as a sign of quality maturity.

The fact that many units did address some weaknesses while developing the SER underlines the value of self-evaluation. The value of commendations (for the unit's strengths) and also affirmations of improvement plans already in place should also be stressed. These units want to know what they are doing well. This confirms the value of the peer review as a way of verifying the unit's self-evaluation.

7.2 Improvements to the process

The following table illustrates how the process can be improved through the actions of both the unit, as well as the unit supporting the quality review:

Development of the SER	
Roles and responsibilities of the unit	Roles and responsibilities of UQP
The development of the SER can be regarded as the backbone of the developmental approach, so it is recommended that units devote adequate time and consultation during the development.	The SER writer is the individual closest to the process and requires the most intensive support.
The collection of evidence should not be a mechanical process to collect documents, but an opportunity to take a critical look at the unit from a different perspective.	The quality review process is experienced differently by people in managerial positions to those working with more practical aspects of the review process. Support should be sensitive to this when training different members in the unit.

A carefully considered approach to the development of the SER, as well as the regular monitoring of the development of the SER should be the responsibility of the chairperson.	Merger and staff issues still feature to a significant extent. Training to sensitise staff to the existence of merger issues is important.
Regular discussions with small groups of staff should also contribute to the early identification of problems in this area.	Every unit is different i.e. differing levels of complexity in functions, number of sub-units, dynamics between staff members etc. Support staff should manage this.
Site visit, interviews and debriefing sessions	
Roles and responsibilities of the unit	**Roles and responsibilities of UQP**
Units should understand what the purpose of the site visit and interviews is.	UQP should clarify the purpose of each step of the process and the interactions between them to the unit.
The purpose of debriefing should be clear to the unit, as well as the panel. The panel should be informed if debriefing sessions are to occur.	Panel briefings conducted should convey the unit's (and broader institutional) expectations to the panel.
The unit should convey any additional expectations to the panel.	
Units should budget appropriately for their quality review.	

Table 3: Roles and responsibilities of unit and UQP

7.3   Concluding remarks

The benefits of quality reviews cannot be quantified but in the context of a (large) newly merged institution operating on four campuses benefits such as the teambuilding are critical to improved functioning. Although quality reviews are time and labour intensive, the research indicates that they do indeed add value. This is clearly evident from the willingness of respondents to undergo another review.

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Questions for discussion

1. Where a unit works with students, how do you involve students in the development of the SER?
2. How do you equip support staff in quality units to deal with the uniqueness and dynamics present in units?