Deconstructing quality in South African higher education

Kehdinga George Fomunyam
Durban University of Technology, Durban, South Africa

Received 18 November 2016
Revised 13 July 2017
Accepted 22 September 2017

Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to examine six South African universities with a particular focus on the quality of teaching and learning.

Design/methodology/approach – A qualitative case study approach was adopted and data were mainly generated by means of open-ended questionnaires. The questionnaire was circulated to approximately 1,800 students and 746 completed it. The data were categorized and analysed thematically, using both national and international benchmarks for quality teaching and learning.

Findings – The findings reveal that teaching and learning in South African universities is marred by a plethora of challenges. Lecturers lack basic skills and essential resources to effectively facilitate teaching and learning. Furthermore, quality benchmarks set by the Council on Higher Education are only met on paper and little or nothing is done to translate this into practice.

Originality/value – The study proposes among others that clearer policies on funding are recommended to ensure proper allocation of resources, staff development and institutional comeliness. Finally, to enhance transformation, universities should prioritize teaching and learning and take steps to ensure that those teaching in the classroom are qualified to do so.

Keywords Quality education, Quality framework, South African higher education, Quality education, Teaching and learning

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

This research on South African higher education and the fallacy of quality was informed by previous research undertaken by the researcher in a South African university. The first study pointed to a lack of quality teaching and learning from students' constructions, calling for broader research involving several other universities to test this conclusion. In this study six universities were selected with the hope of further exploring the phenomenon of quality in South African higher education.

Quality in higher education is not a new issue, and it has been the subject of debate for decades. Ansah (2016) notes that universities and government agencies previously used terms such as academic standards, standards of degrees, student assessment and accountability to represent quality in higher education. He adds that the growing need for higher education in Africa in particular and the world in general has increased pressure on universities to deliver at optimal level. Furthermore, the central role played by higher education in societal development, poverty alleviation, social transformation and social justice has highlighted the need for quality. This has motivated nations and regions to adopt quality assurance mechanisms (Shabani *et al.*, 2014). Henard and Leprince-Ringuet (2008) identify four major reasons for the increasing demand for quality in higher education, especially with regard to teaching and learning. The first is the increasing number of students enrolling in higher education institutions. Globally, the number of students gaining access to higher education since the 1960s has increased. In South

Quality Assurance in Education
Vol. 26 No. 1, 2018
pp. 44-59

0968-4883
DOI 10.1108/QAE-11-2016-0072

Africa, the number grew by 194,000 between 2006 and 2013 (Cloete, 2016). The second factor is that nations and students are demanding learning experiences that offer value for money, especially in light of constant changes in the funding structure of many universities (Teferra, 2013). Higher education is seen as an investment that should enhance national development, individual wealth creation and poverty alleviation. This requires that universities account for their teaching and learning practices. Students who pay tuition fees regard themselves as clients that must be satisfied. As such, they are concerned about the quality of the lectures they pay for. The third reason for the constant demand for quality in higher education is the changing student body and teaching methods. Independence in Africa and the ending of racial discrimination in countries such as the USA led to a more diverse student body. Universities are required to adapt to such diversity and several contextual challenges (Shabani *et al.*, 2014). Furthermore, the increasing use of information and communication technology (ICT) in education, especially higher education has increased demand for quality. This is because lecturers have more resources at their disposal to respond to student challenges. When institutions or the state deploy more resources (ICT resources), expectations on the return on these resources are high, especially because the reason for its deployment is the improvement of the educational experience. Finally, change fosters reflection and debate. New trends in higher education such as convergence, divergence, globalization, internationalization, decolonization and transformation have created a platform for debate about higher education, how it is offered and how it addresses these issues. Hénard and Roseveare (2012) add that the new breed of academics that are trained in the digital age have a different understanding of what good teaching is and how this contributes to quality education. National standards are thus being developed to harmonize quality imperatives and to ensure quality teaching and learning.

Spaull (2013) notes that quality education in South Africa is extremely difficult to define owing to the country's diverse population and the incongruous nature of the education system. He adds that quality education in the country is defined by both immeasurable or unquantifiable objectives and outcomes such as social and civic participation, responsible citizenship, democratic values and egalitarianism and measurable cognitive skills.

Among the reasons for the recent student protests in South African universities is the call for improved quality, as students demand value for money (Cloete, 2016; Fomunyam, 2016b). Fomunyam (2014) argues that students feel that the education they receive does not adequately prepare them for wider world. This raises questions about the quality of education, especially as these institutions on paper pass all quality assurance checks. Is the idea of quality in this institutions as pertaining to teaching and learning a fallacy? Department of Education (1997) highlights four underlying objectives of higher education in South Africa:

(1) to meet the learning needs and aspirations of individuals through the development of their intellectual abilities and aptitudes throughout their lives;

(2) to address the development needs of society and provide the labour market with the ever-changing high-level competencies and expertise necessary for the growth and prosperity of a modern economy;

(3) to contribute to the socialization of enlightened, responsible and constructively critical citizens; and

(4) to contribute to the creation, sharing and evaluation of knowledge.

It is vital to understand what needs to be done to achieve these objectives. While a number of studies have been conducted on the first three purposes of higher education in South Africa (See Spaull, 2013; Strydom *et al.*, 2012; Maistry, 2014 among others), there is a paucity on research on meeting individuals' intrinsic needs, and in this case, students. Knowing what students understand as quality and what they want is one of the ways of keeping them satisfied not only with regard to their studies but also with their experiences in the real world.

The drive for quality in higher education was one of the motivations for the establishment of the Council on Higher Education (CHE), which regulates and promotes quality education in South Africa (CHE, 2008). It also develops quality assurance frameworks that institutions must comply with to retain accreditation. One such framework is the second cycle of quality assurance 2012-2017, which focuses on teaching and learning using three key benchmarks:

(1) fitness for purpose;

(2) value for money; and

(3) transformation that must be taken into consideration in any teaching and learning venture.

The CHE (2012) notes that teaching and learning in South Africa is plagued by several challenges. Fitness of purpose refers to the singular ability of universities or institutions of higher learning to engage in activities according to its mission. They should therefore be able to fit their aspirations, areas of specialization, approach and focus on their key functions and available resources, student and staff profiles and with the institutional mission. This means that individual needs and staff abilities should be taken into consideration when addressing teaching and learning. As universities are complying with quality assurance guidelines to retain accreditation for their programmes, it is vital to understand how students' construct quality education. Value for money also informs quality in higher education. The state as well as individual families, especially middle- and lower-class families, whose relatives gain access to higher education for the first time, see it as an opportunity to escape poverty, "an investment awaiting dividends". Higher education institutions are therefore called on to ensure value for money. This requires efficient and effective teaching and learning, research to improve teaching and learning and community engagement in their context. Taking funding constraints and financial exclusion into account, value for money is an imperative. Transformation, which is the third and final key construct, engages the relationship between higher education and qualitative change. It revolves around the notion that higher education empowers and transforms the individual for a better future. It also engages a ranch of social, political and economic changes to mark the democratic era. Within the higher education arena, transformation as "societal change" is underpinned by equity and access as well as the conceptualization and implementation of the institution's core functions.

These benchmarks for quality teaching and learning, fitness for purpose, value for money and transformation are articulated at both national and international level. Harvey and Stensaker (2008) and Fomunyam (2016b) identify five key constructs for quality teaching and learning in higher education: excellence, consistency, fitness for purpose, value for money and transformational or transformation. The final three were discussed above. In terms of excellence, Harvey and Stensaker (2008) argue that it involves developing a set of shared goals and objectives based on lived experiences or contextual factors on how to project, support and aspire to excellent performance in higher education. On the other hand,

consistency requires all stake holders or parties to take responsibility to ensure that teaching and learning meets expectations and specifications on an ongoing basis.

Writing for UNESCO, Berkvens *et al.* (2014) identify four key benchmarks for quality teaching and learning: relevance, consistency, sustainability and practicability. The first three are articulated by the CHE (2012) and Harvey and Stensaker (2008) as fitness for purpose and consistency. Practicability deals with fitness for context; in other words, how what is learned or taught meets the needs of the context. Rué *et al.* (2010) suggest three key constructs to address quality in higher education teaching and learning: context, setting and functions. Context refers to the classroom or lecture room where learning takes place. Closed and guided and open and guiding activities as well as small group work situations take place within this setting. In turn, the setting involves the documents or resources available to students, the rules and guidelines accompanying such engagements and psychodynamic and metacognitive activities. Finally, functions refer to communication modalities within the teaching and learning process, the application of the theory learned, regulation and self-regulation and planning further action by both students and lecturers.

Elassy (2015) argues that quality education over the past five decades has been understood from four different perspectives. The first perspective regards quality education as the conformance to standards. Standards in the higher education sector would mean conditions that must be met by institutions or programmes to be accredited by an accreditation agency and in South Africa, this would be the CHE. To this effect, quality is responding to the question "is it good enough?"(Gibbs, 2011). The second perspective sees quality as fitness for purpose and this definition of quality was adopted based on the view that quality had no meaning except in relation to the purpose of the product or service (Cheng, 2011). The third perspective on the meaning of quality sees it as effectiveness in achieving institutional goals. As such, if education was able to achieve institutional goals (whatever these were), it would be deemed as being of quality. The fourth perspective on quality education understands it as meeting customers' stated needs or value for money. Students are seen as customers who must be satisfied and for this to happen, academics must know who the customers are, what their needs are and how to satisfy them (Anderson, 2006).

Thus, whether at the national or international level, quality assurance can be addressed using five key constructs: fitness for purpose, value for money, transformation, consistency and excellence or functions. It is vital for quality education in South Africa to be understood from both the national and international perspective, as the number of international students has increased since the advent of democracy.

Research design and methodology

The study on which this article is based was a qualitative case study (Fomunyam, 2016b). The qualitative approach explores every detail about an issue or a case. It unearths the quality of what is being researched (Nieuwenhuis, 2010). This approach was used to generate rich, in-depth data on quality education in South African universities. Maxwell (2005) asserts that qualitative research involves setting goals that can be achieved and specific outcomes which meet a need and whose intellectual goal is to understand or explain certain concepts or issues. He identifies the following goals of qualitative research:

- practical goals aimed at generating results and theories that are valid and can be understood by the participants as well as the reader;
- conducting formative evaluation to improve practice; and
- engaging in collaborative action research with diverse parties.

A qualitative approach was appropriate for this study as it set on several of these goals. Neuman (2006, p. 40) defines a case study as:

> [. . .] an in-depth study of one particular case or group of cases in which the case may be a person, a school, a group of people or organizations, an organization, a community, an event, a movement, or geographical unit.

This means that case study can either be an entity or a group of entities combined together to form a case. As such what makes the case is the unique characteristic that binds the entities together or the single entity itself. A case therefore can be a school or a group of schools within a particular location. In this paper, six universities were combined to form a case to establish some form of representative, especially because the study is building on another case study conducted in a single university. In this instance, the case under study is South African higher education and the unit of exploration was six universities in South Africa. This is in line with Neuman (2006) who argues that case study can either be a group of people or organizations.

Questionnaires were used to generate the rich, in-depth data required for a qualitative case study. Cohen *et al.* (2011) maintain that a questionnaire is a means of eliciting the feelings, beliefs, experiences, perceptions or attitudes of a sample of individuals. It could be closed or open-ended. Open-ended questionnaires were used to generate data. The sample was selected using non-probability purposive sampling. Cohen *et al.* (2011) note that in this type of sampling, the researcher uses his/her personal judgment to select individuals with the particular characteristics that are considered relevant to the study. The questionnaire was sent to about 1,800 students from six universities (not named or described for ethical reasons) from six different provinces at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Of these, 746 were completed and returned. The questionnaire contained five major questions: What do you understand by quality education? Do you think you are receiving quality education in your university? If yes or no, provide reasons or further explanations for your answer. What do you think can be done to improve the quality of education in your institution? What resources do you think are required to improve the quality of education in your institution? (This question was added because of the strong emphasis placed on resources by students in an earlier study of a similar nature at one university).

Findings

Owing to the qualitative nature and volume of the data, it was necessary to organize it into themes in relation to the research questions. This is so because the research was directed by five questions and the paper aimed at answering the questions. The data generated from each question were coded and categorized into themes. These themes then represent the general views of the participants regarding the questions. Each question therefore is answered using a set of themes and the themes are justified using direct quotations form the participants. The coding and categorization for the first question on the students' constructions of quality education resulted in five themes: unveils the unknown, the use of vital resources, marketability, student-driven and interactive learning. Students' constructions of quality education highlighted that it unveils the unknown. Rendering the unknown-known is an indicator that students are learning, which signals quality education. One respondent stated that quality education:

> [. . .] means students are given an education that challenges their thinking by bringing new knowledge; engage in reading as we have been given articles to read so as to empower our knowledge and be able to apply what we have learnt to our studies and teaching practices.

Another said that, "quality education is a process of upgrading a learner's mind through constant injection of new knowledge". Unveiling the unknown is thus a pointer to quality education.

Use of resources was another factor identified as defining quality education. Resources such as computers, projectors, books, chairs, tables and the internet are vital for effective teaching and learning. One of the participants asserted that, "quality education depends on quality resources and the dedication of the lecturers". Another stated that for there to be quality education, "there should be availability of relevant and appropriate material resources". Resources are therefore key to quality education as well as quality teaching and learning.

The students pointed to marketability as a defining characteristic of quality education. A participant observed that, "quality education is when schools produce students who are job marketable and have requirements that can give them entrance to post graduate studies". As the aim of education is to access the job market and generate an income, marketability is vital.

Student-driven education was regarded as another hallmark of quality education. Some of the participants believed that lecturers should be facilitators of the teaching and learning process rather than masters of the craft who come to class to discharge knowledge to ignorant students. As students have social capital, they should direct their learning. A participant pointed out that:

> Quality education must be student led rather than the lecturers coming to class every day to talk for hours. They must give students the opportunity to champion their own learning.

Another added that:

> [. . .] in the past we were being fed with information to memorize which was terrible. Now that we have democracy, students must direct their own learning for there to be quality since this would help them grow.

Another set of participants opted for interactive rather than student- or lecturer-driven learning. As one of them puts it, "quality teaching and learning means the type of teaching that involves interactions between the lecturers and the students". This would enable students and lecturers to share experiences, which is the basis for knowledge construction. Another student stated that:

> [. . .] quality education is when teaching and learning becomes a combine effort of the lecturer and students taking place in a conducive environment where everyone's voice is heard and not silenced. It is an interactive process.

These themes offered a variety of ways to understand quality education from students' perspectives. The varied nature of the themes is indicative of the diverse nature of the students and the kind of education they feel should be delivered by universities.

In relation to the second research question on whether or not the students believed that they were receiving quality education, 232 of the participants stated that the education they were receiving was of high quality, while 514 responded that quality was lacking. Thus, approximately 31 per cent of the participants believed that they were receiving quality education, while 69 per cent felt that their education lacked quality. The reasons they advanced were tied to their definitions of quality education.

The reasons advanced by those who believed that they were receiving quality education in their institution were coded and merged into three themes: employability, knowledge impartation and teaching approaches. Some of the participants believed that graduates from their university stood a better chance of obtaining jobs than those at other institutions.

Employability was thus the hallmark of excellence. As stated earlier, education in South Africa is an investment in socio-economic advancement. Every student hopes to obtain a job immediately after graduation. One of the participants stated that:

> [. . .] schools only want high quality teachers who would teach their learners very well and increase their matric pass rate. All my friends who graduated last year have all been employed, some in private schools and some in government schools. This means that they have been well trained.

Another participant said: "my institution provides quality education since it has productive students who are economically productive and gainfully employed after their degree". Thus, how ready the job market is to receive students taking into consideration the increasing number of graduates determines quality education in the minds of these students.

In terms of knowledge impartation, as gaining knowledge is the principal purpose of education and higher education in particular, such impartation is a key imperative in the teaching and learning process. Students believe that quality lecturers are able to impart quality knowledge. One of the participants argued that:

> [. . .] the knowledge being imparted in this university is a guarantee of the quality of the system. Because when I compare myself with my friends in other universities also studying education, I know I am far better because I know a lot they don't know. The systems put in place is doing its utmost best to impart knowledge to the students.

Another participant maintained that, "the institution is providing us with good lecturers who give the best knowledge to their students" and a third participant said, "I have received more knowledge. I can view things with different eyes". The more vital the knowledge the participants felt was being imparted, the more they believed that their education was of high quality. Furthermore, a participant added that:

> [. . .] the knowledge we receive is opening our minds and is of quality since it directs us to our goals. The curriculum of this institution is more relevant and goal directed.

Teaching approaches was the final theme that emerged from the data in relation to high quality education. As knowledge construction principally occurs through pedagogy or teaching approaches, it follows that the more efficient the teaching approaches used by lecturers are, the more successful the teaching and learning process will be. The students alluded to the teaching strategies or approaches used by their lecturers to facilitate their learning, as a pointer to the quality of education. One stated that:

> [. . .] the teaching and learning that we are engaged in is of high quality because it is learner centred. The lecturers give us the chance to express ourselves. We are not oppressed or silenced in the classroom.

Another participant observed that:

> I passed my B.Ed. long time ago, thus I have forgotten about what was said about curriculum development and research methodology. Doing course work has freshened my memory extensively because of the teaching strategies used by my lecturer. I thank him for this.

Effective teaching strategies were thus regarded as a key indicator of quality teaching and learning.

On the other hand, 514 of the 746 participants felt that they were not receiving quality education and put forth a number of reasons to support this assertion. Four themes emerged:

(1) poor teaching and learning resources;
(2) poor teaching approaches;
(3) overcrowded classrooms; and
(4) a lack of educational resources.

As noted earlier, resources are a vital part of the teaching and learning process, especially in higher education. One of the participants started that:

> [. . .] our classrooms or lecture rooms lack basic resources like electricity sockets, overhead projectors amongst others. The classes that had these things, most of them are broken taking teaching and learning back to the era of tabula rasa.

Another said that:

> [. . .] some of the lecturers lack working knowledge of teaching and learning resources like Moodle, blackboard and other social networking sites which are constantly being adapted for teaching and learning and this makes classes, boring, obscure and void of quality.

As students learn differently, some by listening and others by seeing, teaching and learning resources ought to cater for such diversity. A lack of such resources negatively affects the quality of education.

In terms of poor teaching approaches, the experience a lecturer garners over time determines how well he or she masters basic teaching approaches. It also helps to solidify his or her teaching philosophy, making him or her more efficient in the classroom. Some of the participants believed that teaching and learning in their institution suffered from poor teaching approaches. One of the participants stated:

> My lecturers just come to class and talk for one hour thirty minutes without giving us the opportunity to participate. We are seen as empty vessels who must be filled with knowledge. This is not empowering us, it is sish (bad).

In contemporary South Africa, where transformation is the new buzzword, teaching and learning must promote individual transformation. Another participant added that:

> Education these days is supposed to use learner centred pedagogy and help us construct knowledge. They are teaching us to be teachers. They can't expect to teach us using a teacher centred approach and assess us in schools using learner centred approach. It's wrong.

Thus, the quality of education depends to a large degree on the teaching approach adopted.

Overcrowded classrooms also emerged as a key cause of poor quality education. An overcrowded lecture theatre hampers student participation. Moreover, the size of the class determines the strategies the lecturer can use and how effectively he or she can engage students. Classroom management and discipline also suffer when classes are too large. To this effect, one of the participants asked:

> How can we talk about quality education when 180 students are forced to attend lecturers in a venue meant for 60 students? Half of the students end up not being able to hear the lecturer because they are standing outside. My secondary school is better than this. There is no quality here. All they keep asking for is money.

Dealing with students who are just a rung or two below them on the academic ladder is challenging enough, but dealing with an overcrowded class of students who feel that one is not qualified to teach them would definitely affect the quality of teaching and learning. Another participant said:

> I can't count the number of times I go to class and I have to sit on the floor and end up not getting what the lecturer is saying because the students are disturbing. We are about three hundred in the class, so very few of us get to say anything or ask a question during the lecture whether we understand the subject or not.

Overcrowding thus introduces a range of challenges, which affects the quality of education.

A lack of educational resources was another reason why some of the participants felt that they were not receiving quality education. Universities require educational resources such as computer labs, well-furnished libraries, the internet, reading commons and more personal or individualized spaces where students can learn without being disturbed. Some of the students who participated in the study were of the opinion that their university lacked educational resources or had insufficient resources. One stated that:

> [. . .] my campus within the university has over five thousand students, but the entire campus has five computer Local Area Network (LANs) with less than five hundred computers in them. At times you have to wait in the Local Area Network for two hours before getting a computer. The printers most often don't work. This place is just like my primary school.

As students are expected to use the LANs to complete certain educational tasks such as typing and printing assignments and accessing online platforms such as Moodle and Turnitin, their availability is vital for successful teaching and learning. Another participant observed that:

> [. . .] the lack of new books and space in the library, coupled with the constant challenges created by platforms like Turnitin, poor internet connection and the poorly resourced and maintained LANs make the quality of education in this school disturbing especially at the undergraduate level. But the university don't seem to notice that the quality is poor.

Educational resources are thus vital in ensuring quality teaching and learning.

The next question asked the participants to identify the ways in which they thought that the quality of education in their institution could be improved. A wide range of responses were received, which were related to the challenges identified by those that felt that they were not receiving quality education and areas that those who said they were enjoying quality education felt could be improved. The data were categorized into five themes: increase resources, professional development, increase contact sessions and improve assessment and teaching approaches.

In relation to teaching approaches, the participants felt that there was much room for improvement. One said:

> Lecturers must learn to use active learning in class. Most students cannot stay focused throughout a lecture. After about 10 minutes, their attention begin to drift. By the end of the lecture they are taking in little and retaining less, students' attention can be retained in a session by giving them something to do.

Another participant felt that, "Lecturers must engage cooperative learning in instruction, which involves students working in teams to accomplish an assignment task and produce a final product", while a third participant stated that, "Lecturers must introduce learners to new methods that will be easier for them to understand the information given to them". Others simply stated that lecturers must "change teaching methods. Be more focus on the learning process" and "try new methods in the classroom like passive learning. Give work that is more individual than group-work". Some participants were more specific, making recommendations such as, "Lecturers must co-operate both e-learning with manual instruction" and "engaging students to group discussions, presentations about their realistic experiences in the working environment and to encourage co-operative learning". It is thus

clear that students are not empty vessels but meaning makers who know what they require from the teaching and learning process.

Improved assessment was the second theme that emerged. The role played by assessment in education cannot be over emphasized because it determines students' educational progress. One of the participants felt that, "Lecturers must survey students after first six weeks of a course, as a rule, the few students who dislike work would bunk classes". Another said that:

> Assessment and evaluation of teaching quality most become part of the institution. Students' opinion are important and should be included in any assessment plan, meaningful evaluation of teaching must rely primarily on assessment of learning outcomes.

Furthermore, a student noted that, "Feedback should be provided timeously so that student could know their strengths and weaknesses". Another added: "Lecturers must link teaching to assessment. Assessment should develop articulate thinking. Teaching and assessment must be integrated". Lecturers should therefore amend their assessment practices to improve the quality of education in their institution.

The study participants also expressed the need for more contact sessions. One of the students stated the need for "lectures and extra notes to give us full information". Another participant pointed out that:

> Lecturers should bear in mind that as students we come from different background. So they should offer extra classes to give more information which is broken down to simple forms.

Others cited the need for lecturers to "complete an efficient introductory course with students" and that "more sessions with student involvement should be done to allow for clarity of some issues concerning curriculum studies". The number of contact sessions will determine the extent of knowledge construction by both parties.

As some participants felt that certain lecturers were unqualified or lacked vital skills, professional development was seen as another key to improving quality. Professional development is also required for students to enable them to understand their role in the teaching and learning process. A participant said: "lecturers should develop themselves" and attend "regular workshops which would help them grow professionally". Professional development would help lecturers deal with challenging issues such as classroom management and disruptive behaviour.

No university can function without both human and material resources. As such, some participants felt that more resources should be made available in their institution. One of the students said:

> It's very hard, long journey to go, we need government to take part through our education, increase of lecturers, resources, schools, security in schools and quality workshop of teachers should be considered.

Another called for:

> [. . .] more LAN's to be provided as the existing ones are almost fully booked and used, sometimes you wait for the whole day and ended up leaving the university without luck of using computers.

Owing to the emphasis placed on resources in explaining the poor quality of education, the participants were asked a follow-up question on the kind of resources they felt were required to improve the quality of education. The resources were broken up into two categories: human and material resources. In relation to human resources, a student felt that "the institution needs to put over students people in real situation like, experts of curriculum who are retired, and professors". The participants called into question the qualifications of some

lecturers, with one participant asserting that, "We need more doctors and professors to teach the main educational modules so that we can understand better". Another said: "We also need tutors for all the modules who can assist us in small groups after the lecture to understand the things we do not understand". A third added: "We need highly qualified facilitators with multiple theories of teaching strategies, facilitators who would understand the diverse background of the student". Another participant felt that "we also need more administrators and coordinators who know what they are doing". Human resources are key to improving quality, as they are the main players in the teaching and learning process.

The participants also expressed the need for improved materials resources to enhance the quality of teaching and learning. These include both software (such as the internet and learning management systems) and hardware (physical resources). One of the students pointed out that, "more computers are needed in research common. I think the university must provide students with mentors at least at the beginning of the year". The participants stated that, "we need more labs for studies because sometimes the students used to wait in a long queue for doing studies"; "more computer labs are needed. Improvement on technology in terms of Wi-Fi internet and improved means of communication"; "more computer labs with internet; "more/sufficient computers (that are working) in the LAN, colour photocopying machines" and "more computers and printers for accessing computer need studies". Others felt that, "overheard projectors, microphones and speakers are highly needed for effective communication, especially in over crowed classes" and "more recent books and articles should be printed for us. Maybe with the registration fee we pay, provision should be made for each student to have a laptop". A total of 70 participants advocated for more computers LANs, improved Wi-Fi connects, new editions and recent publications, course packs, improve library stock of books and colour printing. Others expressed the need for resources such as interactive boards, with one stating that:

> [. . .] we need interactive boards in most classes and also to help with the improvement of writing skills to students so that they can be able to learn academic writing with ease especially when registering for curriculum studies masters one must be allocated with a supervisor from the scratch.

The students therefore believed that a wide range of resources is required to improve the quality of education.

Discussion of findings

The findings of the study show that the students were not satisfied with the quality of the education they were receiving. The six institutions covered represent more than 20 per cent of South Africa's 26 public universities, which enables these results to be generalized to some extent. Cloete (2016) argues that South African higher education, especially at the undergraduate level is plagued by problems, as only about 41 per cent of students graduate in under five years in contact universities and 45 per cent are not expected to graduate. While there are many reasons for this situation, the quality of teaching and learning is high on the list. It is therefore important to discuss the findings of this study against the backdrop of quality benchmarks at both at national and international levels to enhance meaning making.

In relation to question one, five themes emerged which explain students' understanding or construction of quality, namely, unveils the unknown, the use of vital resources, marketability, student driven and interactive learning. Department of Education (1997) argues that teaching and learning in South African higher education aims to meet individuals' learning needs and aspirations through the development of their intellectual

abilities and aptitudes throughout their lives. As education is primarily about mental development, teaching and learning must effectively provide such development. Vital human and material resources are required to effectively unravel the unknown. In terms of human resources, competent lecturers, tutors and student mentors are needed and large classrooms, computers, the internet, e-learning platforms and others are vital material resources in enhancing quality. Fomunyam (2016a) in his study found that most students felt that their education did not prepare them well for the world of work. This suggests that human resources lack capacity to ensure quality teaching and learning. Harvey and Stensaker (2008) argue that as a key indicator of quality education, excellence is about developing a set of shared goals and objectives based on live experiences or contextual factors on how to project, support and aspire to excellent performance in higher education. Students thus had strong views on what quality education is and how it is enacted in the classroom. Marketability and student-driven were the other two themes that emerged from the first question. Students must be able to market themselves upon graduation, as most undertake higher education to improve their socio-economics status. Furthermore, as education in the contemporary world is student or learning centred, students believe that quality teaching and learning should be student driven (Cheng, 2011). Students know best what their challenges are and what they want from higher education. In a country such as South Africa with its history of subjugation, empowering the previously oppressed is vital in achieving transformation (CHE, 2008). The past theme was interactive learning where the participants felt that lecturers should create an atmosphere that promotes interaction in the classroom among all stakeholders. Fomunyam (2016b) argues that students interact with both lecturers and other students in the knowledge construction process, thereby enhancing their social and cultural capital. This could go a long way in meeting the demand for excellence that Harvey and Stensaker (2008) identified as a key construct of quality.

In response to the second question on the assessment of teaching and learning, 232 participants felt that their education was of high quality, while 514 felt the opposite. Three themes emerged with regard to the reasons for students' assertions that they were receiving quality education: employability, knowledge impartation and teaching approaches. These participants believed that they were highly usable and had gained adequate knowledge through relevant and up-to-date teaching approaches. Hénard and Roseveare (2012) argue that institutions should strengthen their pedagogical approaches and engage students more to promote quality education. Sound pedagogical approaches are therefore vital in ensuring the quality of teaching and learning. Hopkins (2015) adds that staff development is important in ensuring that academics' teaching approaches are up-to-date. As education principally involves discovering the unknown and is a means of improving one's socio-economic status (CHE, 2012; Fomunyam, 2016b), mental development and knowing how to use the knowledge acquired in the work place are crucial.

On the other hand, the students who believed that their education lacked quality pointed to poor teaching and learning resources, poor teaching approaches, overcrowded classrooms and a lack of educational resources. Hénard (2010) argues that most universities lack pedagogical guidelines on teaching and learning. Coupled with a lack of basic teaching and learning resources, the effect can only be disastrous. This violates the value for money benchmark for quality (CHE, 2012) and the excellence or function criterion, as students take little or nothing from the knowledge construction process (Harvey and Stensaker, 2008). Resources are key in teaching and learning and inform the pedagogical choices that lecturers make and vice versa. However, when classes are overcrowded and there are few resources to facilitate teaching and learning, such teaching and learning would be of low quality and would undermine transformation efforts (Fomunyam, 2016a). Cloete (2016)

maintains that the South African higher education system, especially at undergraduate level is dysfunctional with about 40 per cent of students unlikely to ever graduate. This suggests that little or no practical transformation of teaching and learning has taken place. Transformation is a key issue not only at the level of quality assurance (CHE, 2012) but also as a national project in response to apartheid oppression (Department of Education, 1997).

The next question asked students to offer solutions to the teaching and learning "crises". Five themes emerged, namely, increase resources, professional development, increase contact sessions and improve assessment and teaching approaches. The five themes can be placed within three key benchmarks for quality teaching and learning in higher education: value for money, transformation and excellence (CHE, 2012; Harvey and Stensaker, 2008). These constructs demand that teaching and learning be of a standard that justifies the constant increase in fees. Fees at South African higher education institutions have increased every year, except for 2016 when, in response to widespread student protests, the president declared a moratorium (Cloete, 2016). Value for money requires that teaching and learning is of excellent quality, which calls for continuous professional development and increased resources. As such, both the institutions and the lecturers functioning within them must ensure that transformation is achieved not only at the level of policy but also on the ground in terms of course content, teaching approaches and academic development and support. Rué *et al.* (2010) argue that this would enable quality to gradually begin to manifest itself in the teaching and learning process. Berkvens *et al.* (2014) add that in taking such steps, it is vital to ensure that the process continues in response to consistency and fitness for purpose, as if quality teaching and learning is enacted in the first year of an education programprogramme but not in subsequent years, its very purpose is defeated.

The final question, which specifically dealt with resources, produced two themes: human and material resources. Students pointed out that more human resources were required to facilitate teaching and learning, coupled with an increase in material resources (Fresen, 2005). As teaching and learning is not only a function of what is enacted during lectures but also what students do during their free time within the educational environment, resources are vital. Institutions should therefore be fit for purpose in terms of having sufficient resources to offer the programmes they are accredited for. This would enable them to meet student needs and promote transformation. Chapman and Adams (2002) and Heystek and Minnaar (2015) argue that quality must be sustainable to have any practical meaning and it can only be sustainable when institutions take practical steps to provide the resources required.

Conclusion

The majority of the students that participated in this study argued that higher education suffered from a lack of quality teaching and learning. Of all the participants, 232 students believed their education was of high quality, while 514 believed it lacked quality. While the experiences of individual students in school cannot be neglected, over 65 per cent of the students believed that their education lacked quality, raising several questions about the state of education in these institutions. Quality in South African higher education as pertains to teaching and learning is measured using three key indicators, namely, fitness for purpose, value for money and transformation and students' views are vital in understanding if value for money or transformation is being attained. From the findings of the study, therefore, several conclusions can be drawn and recommendations made on how to improve the quality of education. Higher education institutions are thus called on to ensure that quality benchmarks are met not

only on paper but also in practice. In South Africa, policy has continuously failed to translate into practice and this undermines the transformation agenda. The following recommendations are made to promote quality teaching and learning:

- quality assurance benchmarks should include practical components, which universities must adhere to, thereby ensuring that student needs are met;
- South African higher education institutions should promote continuous development of their teaching staff and ensure that they are qualified to do their job;
- to address the issues of access and overcrowding, more infrastructure and institutions are needed to ensure that universities do not have to admit more students than they can cater for; and
- institutions should craft structural adjustment programmes to ensure that contingency plans are in place to address any shortfalls in fitness for purpose benchmarks.

Furthermore, to achieve transformation, excellence, consistency and value for money, funding mechanisms for higher education in South Africa need to be reviewed to empower universities to be both theoretically and practically fit for purpose. Universities must descend from their ivory towers and deal with the basic contextual issues facing them rather than project themselves as institutions of excellence while students suffer. Students' individual needs must be taken into consideration and measures should be adopted to address these issues to create a platform for transformation. The findings of this study suggest that most South African universities are public successes but private failures. A paradigm shift will be required to achieve quality benchmarks at practical level and not only theoretical level.

Value for money, fitness for purpose and transformation as benchmarks for quality assurance at the national level are not simply constructs to be engaged with at the theoretical level, but those are practical issues that must be addressed if true transformation is to be achieved. This would enable the fallacy of quality to fade away and allow South African higher education to measure up to the rest of the world.

References

Anderson, G. (2006), "Assuring quality/resisting quality assurance: academics' responses to 'quality' in some australian universities", *Quality in Higher Education*, Vol. 12 No. 2, pp. 161-173.

Ansah, F. (2016), "Conceptualising external and internal quality assurance in higher education: a pragmatist perspective", *International Journal of African Higher Education*, Vol. 2 No. 1, pp. 135-152.

Berkvens, J., van-den-Akker, J. and Brugman, M. (2014), *Addressing the Quality Challenge Reflections on the Post-2015 UNESCO Education Agenda*, UNESCO Publishing, The Hague.

Chapman, D.W. and Adams, D.K. (2002), *The Quality of Education: Dimensions and Strategies*, Asian Development Bank, Hong Kong.

CHE (2008), *Coordinating Quality Assurance in Higher Education*, Council on Higher Education, Pretoria.

CHE (2012), *Framework for the Second Cycle of Quality Assurance 2012-2017*, Council on Higher Education, Pretoria.

Cheng, M. (2011), "Transforming the learner' versus 'passing the exam': understanding the gap between academic and student definitions of quality", *Quality in Higher Education*, Vol. 17 No. 1, pp. 3-17.

Cloete, N. (2016), *Free Higher Education: Another Self-Destructive South African Policy*, Centre for Higher Education Trust, Pretoria.

Cohen, L., Manion, L. and Morrison, K. (2011), *Research Method in Education*, 7th ed., Routledge, New York, NY.

Department of Education (1997), *A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education, White Paper 3*, Government Gazette, Pretoria.

Elassy, N. (2015), "The concepts of quality, quality assurance and quality enhancement", *Quality Assurance in Education*, Vol. 23 No. 3, pp. 250-261.

Fomunyam, K.G. (2014), "Student teachers experiences of teachers' professional identity within the context of curriculum change", *Global Journal of Human-Social Science: G Linguistics & Education*, Vol. 14 No. 8, pp. 47-56.

Fomunyam, K.G. (2016a), "Student teachers negotiating the teachers' professional identity", *International Journal of Educational Sciences*, Vol. 13 No. 2, pp. 186-193.

Fomunyam, K.G. (2016b), "Theorising student constructions of quality education in a South African university", *Southern African Review of Education*, Vol. 22 No. 1, pp. 46-63.

Fresen, J.W. (2005), "Quality assurance practice in online (web-supported) learning in higher education: an exploratory study", Unpublished doctroal thesis, University of Pretoria, Pretoria.

Gibbs, P. (2011), "Finding quality in 'being good enough' conversations", *Quality in Higher Education*, Vol. 17 No. 2, pp. 139-150.

Harvey, L. and Stensaker, B. (2008), "Quality culture: understandings, boundaries and linkages", *European Journal of Education*, Vol. 43 No. 4, pp. 427-442.

Hénard, F. (2010), *Learning Our Lesson Review of Quality Teaching in Higher Education: Review of Quality Teaching in Higher Education*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

Henard, F. and Leprince-Ringuet, S. (2008), *The Path to Quality Teaching in Higher Education*, OCED Publication, Paris.

Hénard, F. and Roseveare, D. (2012), "Fostering quality teaching in higher education: policies and practices", in Education OIMiH (Ed.), *An IMHE Guide for Higher Education Institutions*, OCED, Paris.

Heystek, J. and Minnaar, L. (2015), "Principals' perspectives on key factors that contribute to sustainable quality education", *Journal of Education*, Vol. 63, pp. 137-157.

Hopkins, D. (2015), *Improving the Quality of Education for All: A Handbook of Staff Development Activities*, Routledge, London.

Maistry, S. (2014), "Education for economic growth: a neoliberal fallacy in South Africa!", *Alternation*, Vol. 21 No. 1, pp. 57-75.

Maxwell, A. (2005), *Qualitative Research Design: An Interactive Approach*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.

Neuman, W.L. (2006), *Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Qualitative Approaches*, 6th ed., Pearson and Az Publishers, New York, NY.

Nieuwenhuis, J. (2010), "Qualitative research designs and data gathering techniques", In K., Maree, *First Steps in Research*, Van Schaik Publishers, Pretoria, pp. 69-97.

Rué, J., Amador, M., Gené, J., Rambla, F.X., Pividori, C., Pividori, I., Torres-hostench, O., Bosco, A., Armengol, J. and Font, A. (2010), "Towards an understanding of quality in higher education: the ELQ/AQA08 model as an evaluation tool", *Quality in Higher Education*, Vol. 16 No. 3, pp. 285-295.

Shabani, J., Okebukola, P. and Oyewole, O. (2014), "Quality assurance in Africa: towards a continental higher education and research space", *International Journal of African Higher Education*, Vol. 1 No. 1, pp. 139-171.

Spaull, N. (2013), *South Africa's Education Crisis: The Quality of Education in South Africa 1994-2011*, Centre for Development and Enterprise, Johannesburg.

Strydom, F., Basson, N. and Melody, M. (2012), *Enhancing the Quality of Teaching and Learning: Using Student Engagement Data to Establish a Culture of Evidence*, Council on Higher Education, Pretoria.

Teferra, D. (2013), "Funding higher education in Africa: state, trends and perspectives", *Journal of Higher Education in Africa*, Vol. 11 Nos 1/2, pp. 19-51.

Further reading

Teferra, D. (2015), "Manufacturing and exporting excellence and 'mediocrity': doctoral education in South Africa", *South African Journal of Higher Education*, Vol. 29 No. 5, pp. 8-19.

Corresponding author

Kehdinga George Fomunyam can be contacted at: georgek@dut.ac.za