

**An exploration into the conditions enabling and
constraining the implementation of quality assurance
in higher education: The case of a small
comprehensive university in South Africa**

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Abstract

At an international level, demands for accountability in respect of the quality of teaching and learning in higher education are increasing. This is also the case in South Africa. The response to these demands has taken the form of the introduction of quality assurance systems to higher education.

In South Africa, a formal national external quality assurance was introduced to the higher education system in 2001 as a result of the establishment of the Higher Education Quality Committee. The Higher Education Quality Committee is a standing committee of the South African Council on Higher Education.

Like other quality assurance agencies across the world, the Higher Education Quality Committee has the responsibility for i) auditing institutions of higher education and ii) accrediting learning programmes. The first cycle of institutional audits ran from 2004 until 2011.

As quality assurance was introduced to the higher education system and the first cycle of institutional audits began, universities in South Africa developed policies and procedures intended to assure quality in three areas of their core functioning: research, teaching and learning and community engagement. The University of Venda, which is the focus of the study on which this thesis is based, was no exception.

As a practitioner in the Centre for Higher Education Teaching and Learning at The University of Venda, it was my observation that the policies and procedures intended to assure quality in teaching and learning were not always implemented by academic staff members. This was in spite of poor student performance data which raised questions about the quality of the teaching and learning processes in place. The study underpinning this thesis was designed to explore this phenomenon. More specifically, it aimed to identify the conditions enabling and constraining the implementation of policies and procedures in two Schools in the University: the School of Health Sciences and the School of Human and Social Sciences.

In order to explore these conditions, I adopted Roy Bhaskar's Critical Realism as an under-labouring philosophy for the study. Critical realism posits a view of reality

comprising three strata, none of which can be reducible to the other. The first of these strata is termed the level of the Empirical and consists of the experiences and observations which become apparent to us through the senses. The second layer, the Actual, consists of events from which these experiences and observations emerge. Underpinning both of these layers is a further layer, the Real, which is not accessible by empirical means and which consists of structures and mechanisms which generate both events at the level of the Actual and experiences and observation at the level of the Empirical. The design of my study sought to reach this deepest layer of reality to identify these mechanisms.

Bhaskar's critical realism is philosophy which needs to be operationalized using substantive, or explanatory, theory. For this purpose, I drew on Margaret Archer's social realism.

The design on my study drew on case study methodology and involved in-depth interviews with members of the two Schools which each formed cases within the more overarching case of the University itself. In addition to these interviews, I analysed a range of institutional documents related to the assurance of quality in teaching and learning.

The exploration of enabling and constraining conditions at the level of the Real allow me to make a series of recommendations in the final Chapter of my thesis intended to enhance the quality assurance system introduced to the University.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1. Introduction

Internationally, public accountability demands on higher education institutions, especially in relation to the quality of teaching and learning, are increasing and higher education institutions have to find ways of providing evidence in concrete, observable and measurable ways of what they are doing to improve teaching and learning. (McCormick 2009 in Strydom, Basson and Mentz, 2012:1)

The above quotation is an indication that the changing higher education landscape has direct impact on every facet of the sector, including teaching and learning. My interest in doing this study is inspired by two reasons, firstly because of the personal experience I had while working at a historically black South African university as a young inexperienced academic in the beginning of my academic career in the late 1990s, and secondly because of the current dramatic global changes in academia that compel academics to rethink their usual *modus operandi* in their practices as academics.

I joined The University of Venda fresh from university with only an Honours degree and no working experience whatsoever. Six months into my new job, I had to lead a newly-formed academic department that was then teaching its first cohort of 3rd year students because the then head of department had gone overseas for doctoral studies. Six months later I was relieved from this onerous task by the appointment of an associate professor. Nonetheless, the department had to survive with the two full-time staff members and a part time lecturer from a nearby university. Since a more senior academic had been appointed, the University required us to introduce an Honours degree the following year. This had an enrolment of about six students. The total student number in the department was around 450 with more than half in the Level 1 class. The fact that the department was required to teach this number of students, enrolled at levels ranging from first year to postgraduate, with only two full-time staff members raised concerns with regard not only to the quality of departmental management and leadership but also, and more importantly, about how teaching and

learning were conceptualised and discharged. The circumstances in which I found myself at the beginning of my own academic career made me aware of the need to pay attention to quality in teaching and learning. However, issues of quality in teaching and learning have become a cause for concern in higher education more widely due to a number of phenomena such as globalisation, internalisation and neo-liberalism – a point to which I will return later.

In South Africa, the shift to democracy in the early 1990s brought a dramatic increase in enrolment figures in historically black institutions and the growing numbers of black students in historically white universities (see Boughey, 2007). At the same time, calls were being made for wide-scale transformation of institutions as the higher education system moved on to a more equitable dispensation (ibid.). As the 1990s wore on, however, enrolments dropped again, particularly at the historically black universities (Cooper and Subotsky, 2001). My department's enrolment figures dropped down to an all-time low, which led to the department's 'rationalisation'. We then had to design and register new modules for the department as the University moved towards developing new programmes following the introduction of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and the outcomes-based approaches to education associated with it. At the same time, we continued to face low enrolment challenges. Due to a strong desire to keep up with challenges, changes and growth in my career, I left the institution to join one of the world's largest distance education institutions that was also experiencing its own problems, thanks to a merger with two other distance education institutions that had been operating differently. Five years later I found myself back in my initial institution, working now as an educational development practitioner in a teaching and learning centre. One of my new duties was to contribute, in one way or the other, to the improvement of the quality of teaching and learning across the University.

In all this, I realised that, although all South African universities have instituted policies and procedures intended to assure and enhance quality, the challenges to their implementation lie in the conditions enabling or constraining academics to implement them. It was this interest in these conditions that led to the study described in this thesis.

1.1 The context of the research

The University of Venda (The University of Venda, henceforth), the institution on which my study is focused, is situated in an area that was known as the Republic of Venda during the homeland system of the apartheid government of South Africa. This university was established in 1981 as a branch of the then University of the North, which is today known as the University of Limpopo. It became a fully-fledged university in 1982. The University of Venda is today counted as one of the historically-disadvantaged public institutions of South Africa. It is an educational haven for students from poor backgrounds from rural areas. Although it does attract students from urban areas such as Gauteng, students from this social group are in the minority.

The institution also faces recruitment and attrition challenges in relation to its academic staff. Although the institution offers competitive remuneration packages to suitably qualified candidates, it is more often than not a challenge to retain these candidates because of the geographical position of the institution. It is far from the centre of urban activities that are more attractive to younger citizens. It is also slow in terms of responding to technological developments.

During the restructuring of the South African higher education system which took place in the early 2000s, The University of Venda was assigned the mandate to become a comprehensive¹ university. Relatively small in size with about 13,000 students, The University of Venda is situated in an area that is generally regarded as rural. Because of its comprehensive status, the University needs to develop both traditional disciplinary-based and vocationally-based modules and programmes. The University is composed of eight schools, of which the School of Humanities is the largest. The schools are i) the School of Human and Social Sciences, ii) the School of Maths and Natural Sciences, iii) the School of Law, iv) the School of Management Sciences, v) the School of Environmental Sciences, vi) the School of Agriculture and Forestry, vii) the School of Health Sciences and, finally, viii) the School of Education. The University envisions

¹ In South Africa, three kinds of public universities exist: 'traditional universities', universities of technology and comprehensive universities. Comprehensive universities offer a mixture of traditional discipline-based programmes and vocational programmes at diploma and degree levels.

itself to be at the centre of tertiary education for rural and regional development in Southern Africa.

1.2 The conceptual focus

The South African higher education system, as is the case globally, has gone through radical changes. Changes in South Africa have also been affected by the need to develop a coherent education system serving all citizens equally in the aftermath of apartheid. The need for change in relation to teaching and learning has been particularly acute as black students from poor socio-economic backgrounds have flooded into the system. The level of autonomy that academics have enjoyed throughout the years has been reduced due to the establishment of higher education quality assurance policies at national level which, of course, have to be implemented at institutional level including at the teaching and learning level.

Before 2000, South African universities were not subject to any external form of quality assurance. Institutions known as 'technikons'² had a special external quality assurance body called the Certification Council for Technikon Education (SERTEC) (South African Council on Higher Education, 2004: 12). However, individual academics or departments in universities had full control in what to teach and how and when to teach it. The internal assurance of quality took place between colleagues if it took place at all. Final year studies would usually be subject to external examination, from the setting of examination questions to the moderation of marked scripts. However, this was not always fully controlled because a colleague could simply contact another individual from another institution to act as an external examiner for some of the modules in a department without her/his choice being subject to any form of scrutiny.

Only after the first democratic elections was a formal external quality assurance body for the universities established in South Africa. Following the identification of quality assurance as a 'lever' for transformation in the first White Paper on Higher Education following the transition to democracy (Ministry of Education, 1997), the Council on

² 'Technikons' were vocational institutions, established at the beginning of the 1980s, offering qualifications mainly at diploma level (Bunting 2002a).

Higher Education, a body responsible for advising the Minister of Education on matters pertaining to higher education, appointed a permanent quality assurance body for all higher education institutions called the Higher Education Quality Committee (South African Council on Higher Education, 2001). The Higher Education Quality Committee, since its inception, has had three major roles: programme accreditation, institutional audits and quality promotion and capacity development (South African Council on Higher Education, 2004: 146). The study reported in this thesis looks at the effects of the establishment of the Higher Education Quality Committee on teaching and learning at The University of Venda. More specifically, it looks at the conditions enabling or constraining academics to implement policies and procedures which resulted as a result of the formation of this external quality assurance body.

1.3 Theoretical framework

The study is underpinned by a framework developed from the work of philosopher Roy Bhaskar and sociologist Margaret Archer.

1.3.1 Critical realism

Critical realism is a philosophy proposed by Roy Bhaskar (1979, 1986), which attempts to recognise the subjective nature of knowledge and argues for the presence of underlying deep mechanisms and enduring structures within the social world (McCormick, 2009). This philosophy of science sees reality through neither the positivist lens nor the constructivist lens (Sayer, 2007).

Bhaskar (1979) proposes a 'stratified' view of reality as opposed to a 'flat monistic ontology'. Following on from this concept of stratification, critical realism, as opposed to empirical and linguistic realism, asserts that the world is composed of structures, powers and tendencies at one level of this stratified reality, the level of the Real. As a result of the interplay of these structures and mechanisms, events at another level, known as the Actual, emerge. Experiences and observations then emerge at the third and final level of reality, the Empirical, as a result of the engagement on the part of individuals and groups in these events (Bhaskar, 1979; Patomaki and Wight, 2000: 223; Sayer, 2007: 12). Critical realism thus acknowledges the primacy of ontology. Crotty

(1998:10) defines ontology as the study of being. It can be simply defined as how one sees or views reality.

The task of the critical realist researcher is to work from empirical data to the level of the Real. The Real consists of unchanging structures and mechanisms which are 'real' because they exist independently of human knowledge, thought or action. When these mechanisms and structures are activated, events take place at the level of the Actual, and at the Empirical level experiences and observations occur. Critical realism acknowledges the relativity of these experiences and observations therefore we cannot safely conflate the varying experiences that people encounter in their empirical world with what is real. Bhaskar (1979) argues that the failure to separate these levels leads to a 'flat ontology' that conflates reality with our experience of it. To conflate different dimensions of looking at reality, to believe that 'what we think is all what is', is, according to Bhaskar (1989:133), to commit the 'epistemic fallacy' (Potomaki & Wight, 2000: 217; Wikgren, 2005: 14).

Denscombe (1998: 139) asserts that positivists hold the view that there are patterns and regularities, causes and consequences in the social world just as there are in the natural world. The interpretivists question the idea that logic and methods of natural science can get imported into the study of societies, while social constructivists emphasise the importance of culture and context in forming understanding (Derry, 1999; McMahon, 1997, cited in Kim, 2010). As I will attempt to show in Chapters Five and Six, critical realism provides a response to these observations and the problems which arise from them.

Patomaki and Wight (2000: 224) summarise the critical realist's stance as the 'problem field', which is committed to ontological realism which says that there is reality which is differentiated, structured and layered and which exists independent of the mind. They further argue that, when studying social objects, we must interpret what these mean for the subject and other relevant social objects whose practices constitute these objects (ibid.).

In my attempt to examine how people act in relation to the need to implement policies and procedures related to quality assurance, critical realism's stratified view of the world provides a frame which allows me to try to identify the enduring structures and mechanisms conditioning their actions. Some of these structures and mechanisms exist in what, following Margaret Archer, I will term the 'domain of culture'.

1.3.2 Social realism

A deeper understanding of the level of the Real and the way structures and mechanisms operate is made possible through the use of Archer's (1995, 1996 and 2000) social realist approach. According to Archer, there are three domains at the level of the Real: structure, culture and agency. Bhaskar's framework avoids the 'epistemic fallacy', or the conflation of what is with what can be experienced empirically, by stratifying reality into the three layers described above. Archer argues against further conflation of the 'parts' (structure and culture) with the 'people' (i.e. human agents). Conflation of the 'parts' with the 'people' is termed by Archer, the 'fallacy of conflation'. In her response to postmodernists' declaration of the 'Death of God' and the 'Death of Man' in society, Archer (2000) vindicates the concept of humanity by arguing that human beings have the power to exercise agency in any social context irrespective of the objective powers of the context. Archer argues that the postmodernist view of life takes shortcuts in its interpretation of reality, which she calls 'conflation'. Two kinds of conflation that Archer identifies are 'upwards' and 'downwards' conflation. Archer describes a situation where the 'parts' (structures and culture) dominate the 'people', which she calls 'downwards' conflation or 'Society's Being'. In contrast, 'upwards' conflation, where the 'people' orchestrate the 'parts', is described as 'Modernity's Man' (Archer, 2000 :1). A third kind of conflation, which she terms 'central' conflation, was brought about by Giddens' Structuration Theory (1984). Giddens (ibid.) argues that the 'parts' and the 'people' are mutually constitutive and cannot be separated – that is that the exercise of agency creates structures and cultures and that, equally, structure and culture constrain human agency. Archer critiques Giddens' view by arguing that, for analytical purposes, the 'parts' and the 'people' should be separated – a move she terms 'analytical dualism'. In this thesis, the use of Archer's analytical dualism allows

me to explore why policies and procedures related to the assurance of quality are not always implemented as intended, by providing a means of analysing agency independently of the structural and cultural conditions in which agents operate.

My attempts to explore the interplay of the 'parts' (structure and culture) and the 'people' (agency) are also facilitated by the use of Archer's (1995) 'morphogenetic framework'. This framework allows us to account for why there is 'morphogenesis' (change) or 'morphostasis' (non-change) over time. The morphogenetic framework will be explored in detail in Chapter Two of this thesis. For now, I will only note its use in allowing me to explore the way attempts to assure and enhance teaching and learning through the introduction of quality assurance policies at institutional level, occasioned by the establishment of the national Higher Education Quality Committee in 2001, have not always resulted in the change anticipated.

1.4 Goal of study

As I have indicated above, the goal of the study reported in this thesis is to explore the conditions enabling and constraining practices conducive to the pursuit of quality in teaching and learning. In the study, I take 'practices' to encompass the implementation of policies and procedures intended to assure quality at The University of Venda following the introduction of a national quality assurance body to South African higher education. In many respects, however, these practices relate more broadly to 'general' academic practices including, for example, the use of external examiners, collaboration with peers around course design, reading in the field to keep up with developments, and so on, since policies and procedures developed for quality assurance purposes generally draw on 'best practice'. Policies and procedures developed at The University of Venda draw on these practices established over centuries in the academic world more generally.

In order to achieve this goal, I examine the way various stakeholders exercised agency in relation to the need to assure quality in teaching and learning. More specifically, I explore the way they exercised their agency in order to allow for the emergence of

events that policies and procedures have identified as 'conducive' to quality and to experiences of 'quality' in policies and procedures.

The Higher Education Quality Committee focuses on a definition of quality as involving fitness *for* and *of* purpose (South African Council on Higher Education, 2007). Purpose is usually understood to be defined in institutional mission and vision statements or in programme purpose statements. Fitness *of* purpose is understood to relate to the extent such statements encompass goals for higher education identified in documents such as the White Paper on Higher Education (Ministry of Education, 1997) and those related to the reconfiguration of South African higher education in the early 2000s (for example the Ministry of Education, 2001, 2002). Fitness *for* purpose is understood to relate to the extent that an institution (or programme) has put in place policies and procedures which ensure that the purpose is indeed achieved. The way academics exercise agency in order to allow for the emergence of events conducive to quality can thus be understood to relate to policies and procedures.

1.5 Research question

Central question:

What constrains and enables practices related to requirements for quality assurance in teaching and learning and experiences of this quality at a small comprehensive, historically disadvantaged university in South Africa?

Sub question:

1. How do conditions in the domain of culture lead to the emergence of quality related practices and experiences of quality?
2. How do conditions in the domain of structure lead to the emergence of quality related practices and experiences of quality?
3. How do individuals exercise their agency in relation to these conditions?

1.6 The significance of the study

As I have indicated above, the use of Archer's (1995, 1996, 2000) work allows me to explore the structural and cultural conditions enabling and constraining the implementation of quality assurance practices at one South African university. As a result of this understanding, I have been able to identify actions which need to be taken by the University's management structures, described as a series of recommendations in the final chapter of the thesis. The study focuses on one case, The University of Venda, and, while I would not argue that the findings derived from this study are generalisable, I would argue that insights derived from it will be useful at other institutions and particularly at historically black universities in South Africa.

1.7 Outline of chapters

This first chapter has presented the background to the study and has briefly outlined the theoretical frame used for the research. I provide an outline of the theoretical framework of critical realism by Roy Bhaskar in Chapter Two. Also in Chapter Two I present Margaret Archer's social realism. This involves discussing analytical dualism and the morphogenetic approach in detail. Chapter Three provides background to the introduction of quality assurance in higher education internationally, nationally and at The University of Venda. Chapter Four describes the design of the research underpinning the thesis. Following Archer's morphogenetic framework, Chapter Five provides an analysis of the structural and cultural conditions in place at The University of Venda when quality assurance was introduced. This allows me to explore how agents were conditioned to act as they were called upon to implement policies and procedures. Chapter Six analyses the way agents selected to participate in the study exercise their agency as a result of this conditioning. Based on the results of the data analysis, Chapter Seven provides conclusions and recommendations related to the way an environment more conducive to the implementation of quality assurance policies and procedures could be created.

CHAPTER TWO: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Introduction

This chapter explores Margaret Archer's social realism (1995, 1996, 2000), whose roots are grounded in Roy Bhaskar's (1979) philosophy of science known as critical realism. Bhaskar argues for a stratified ontology that takes account of an ultimate reality that exists independently of human action and thought and the relativism of human experience of that reality. Archer's social theory is complex and I have selected parts of it for this study. The study itself is based on her morphogenetic framework (1995), which allows me to account for the occurrence of change, or non-change, over time. In the case of this study, change would involve the take-up, on the part of academics, of policies and procedures intended to assure quality. I also use Archer's (1995) construct of analytical dualism, which allows me to analyse the interaction of human beings with the social and cultural conditions which surround them. In this study, this means that I can explore the way the institution and the wider higher education context, as well as broader social contexts, impact on the way academics take up, or fail to take up, measures intended to assure quality. I begin by exploring critical realism before moving on to the work of Archer.

2.2 Bhaskar's critical realism

2.2.1 Ontology

In view of the shortcomings of traditional philosophies such as classical empiricism and transcendental idealism, Roy Bhaskar proposes the philosophy of critical realism Bhaskar (1979). He argues that his philosophy acknowledges the value of both empirical and social constructivist reasoning but that these are biased in their interpretation of social reality.

Critical realism attempts to recognise the subjective nature of knowledge and argues for the presence of underlying deep mechanisms and enduring structures within a social world. This philosophy of science sees reality through neither the positivist lens nor the constructivist lens (Sayer, 2007: 2). It does this by proposing a 'stratified' view of reality

as opposed to a 'flat monistic ontology'. Critical realism, as opposed to empirical and linguistic realism, asserts that the world is composed of three strata or layers: discourses, structures, powers and tendencies at the level of the Real; events at the level of the Actual; and experiences and impressions at the level of the Empirical (Bhaskar, 1979; Patomaki and Wight 2000; Sayer 2007). Sub and Jessop (2013: 9) bring in an interesting dimension by arguing that for critical realism, science involves a continuing spiral movement from empirical phenomena to the underlying structures and causal mechanisms that they generate. The orientation proposed in critical realism acknowledges the primacy of ontology. Crotty (1998) defines ontology as the study of being. It can be simply defined as 'what is' or as 'how one sees or views' reality. Popper (1992) expresses the view that there is a difference between 'what is', i.e. ontology, and 'what we know about it', i.e. epistemology.

The Real consists of relatively enduring structures and mechanisms which are 'real' because they exist independently of human knowledge, thought or action. These structures and mechanisms are intransitive in the sense that they cannot be directly accessed empirically. Rather, a process of reasoning is required to infer them, a point I will return to later. When these mechanisms and structures get activated, events take place at the level of the Actual and, at the level of the Empirical, experiences and observations occur. Hence the levels of the Actual and Empirical are considered as transitive because they can be accessed through the senses. Events can be observed and experienced. The relativity of experience and observations at these levels is acknowledged. Bhaskar (1989) argues that failure to separate these three ontological layers leads to what he terms a 'flat ontology'. He argues that a flat ontology conflates reality and our experience of that reality – i.e. that it ties together ontology and epistemology. According to Bhaskar (1989), the conflation of different dimensions of looking at reality in order to believe that 'what we think is all that is' involves committing the 'epistemic fallacy' (see also, Patomaki 2000: 217 and Wikgren 2005: 14).

Denscombe (1998: 139) asserts that positivists hold the view that there are patterns and regularities, causes and consequences in the social world just as there are in the

natural world and the role of research is to uncover these. The interpretivists question the idea that logic and methods of natural science can get imported into the study of societies while a social constructivist emphasises the importance of culture and context in forming understanding Derry (1999), McMahon (1997, cited in Kim 2001), and Patomaki and Wight (2000: 224) argue that, when studying social objects, we must interpret what these mean for the subject and other relevant social objects whose practices constitute these objects.

In my study, which attempts to explore the conditions which enable or constrain the implementation of quality assurance procedures and policies, critical realism is useful because it allows me to acknowledge and identify a stratum or reality (the Real) which creates those conditions at the Actual and Empirical levels.

In my attempt to explore the conditions that enable or constrain the implementation of quality assurance in higher education, I also examine how people exercise their agency as human beings in relation to culture and structure. Critical realism's stratified view of the world provides a means of examining the ways in which agents based at The University of Venda (lecturers, heads of academic departments and deans of schools) respond and react to the structures in place (approved sets of quality assurance policies at The University of Venda, committees and infrastructure as well as more encompassing structures at national and even global levels) and the new culture being established around the notion of quality assurance, and also to the existing culture which allows them considerable freedoms and which pre-existed their employment at the University. As I will show later in this chapter, I add Archer's social realism to Bhaskar's critical realism to do this.

2.2.2 Generative mechanisms

In critical realist study, researchers concern themselves with the generative mechanisms at the level of the Real that result in the events at the level of the Actual and the experiences at the level of the Empirical. Danermark, Ekstrom, Jakobsen and Karlsson (2002) state that, unlike the experimental research of the positivist lens, critical

realism does not subscribe to the idea of cause and effect relationships but rather to the idea that ‘tendencies’ of generative mechanisms at the level of the Real may or may not lead to the emergence of an event at the level of the Actual and observations and experiences at the level of the Empirical. This implies that generalisation of results is not an option in critical realism because mechanisms that cause an event to take place in some environments may not cause a similar result in another social context. In any context, some mechanisms will be active and others dormant. It is the interplay of active mechanisms which leads to events and experiences of them.

In this study I attempt to identify the generative mechanisms that lead the implementation of quality assurance policies in the two selected schools of the same university. Implementation is conceptualised as a set of practices at the level of the Actual that then lead to participants’ observations and experiences of those practices. Since the two schools differ in their professional conduct but are operating in a single institutional context, I should be able to understand the generative mechanisms that influence their *modus operandi*. To achieve this I turn to Margaret Archer’s social realism.

2.3 Margaret Archer’s social realism

2.3.1 Why social realist methodology or ontology?

Social realism is of significance to this study for a number of reasons. Firstly, it draws on Bhaskar’s notion of a stratified view of reality outlined above. In this study, my aim is to go beyond the provision of a relativist account of why quality assurance procedures and policies are, or are not, implemented at one South African university in order to identify generative mechanisms with the tendencies to result in the emergence of practices which either lead to the assurance of quality or which do not. Secondly, social realism allows for an exploration of the way change occurs, or does not occur, *over time*. It does this through the use of Archer’s (1995) morphogenetic framework, which allows social researchers to analyse the interplay between ‘the people’ (i.e. human agency) and ‘the parts’ (i.e. structure and culture) in any social milieu. In this study, I examine a particular period of time starting with the first cycle of quality assurance work instituted by the

Higher Education Quality Committee, the body responsible for quality assurance in South Africa, up to the present day. I am therefore able to link a localised study (i.e. a study in one South African university) with wider national (and even global) imperatives over a specific time period in South African history. Thirdly, social realism requires me to adopt analytical dualism involving the artificial separation, for the purposes of analysis, of 'the parts' (structure and culture) and 'the people' (agency). The rationale behind the separate analysis of the parts is that each domain has its own unique emergent, autonomous and efficacious properties and powers that can or cannot bring about change. Social realism avoids the epiphenomenal character prevalent in other social theories where '... *either* the "parts" *or* the "people" are held to be the *ultimate constituents* of social reality to which the other could be reduced' (Archer, 2000: 5). Archer calls this tendency to reduce 'the parts' or 'the people' into either form 'conflation'. In the context of this study, analytical dualism allows me to explore the way lecturers, heads of schools, deans and so on are conditioned by the social contexts in which they find themselves but, at the same time, exercise their agency to make decisions about whether and how quality assurance mechanisms should be implemented. It thus allows me to arrive at a more nuanced answer to my research questions.

2.3.2 Conflation and analytical dualism

As I have indicated above, the notion of 'conflation' is central to Archer's work. Archer identifies a number of kinds of conflation. She describes a situation where 'the parts' (structures and culture) dominate 'the people' as 'downwards' conflation or 'Society's Being'. This view strips human beings of power and sees agency as an epiphenomenon of society. The opposite, where 'the people' are understood to orchestrate 'the parts' is then 'upwards' conflation or 'Modernity's Man' (Archer, 2000:4). The third kind of conflation is called 'central' conflation and was brought about by Giddens' (1984) Structuration Theory. Giddens argues that 'the parts' and 'the people' are mutually constitutive of each other. For Giddens, 'the parts' and 'the people' cannot be separated and therefore cannot be analysed separately. Archer critiques Giddens' view by arguing that it locks 'the parts' and 'the people' together in a 'conceptual vice' (1996: 87). This then means that we cannot answer questions about *when* agents might be able to be

transformative of society. She then goes on to argue that, in order to answer questions about *when*, 'the parts' and 'the people' need to be separated for analytical purposes.

This study is essentially an attempt to understand social change at a historically disadvantaged South African university located in a rural area, characterised by students with financial and academic problems and other challenges. I believe that Archer's analytical dualism allows me to better understand this change by providing a means to explore the impact of social conditions on human action while, at the same time, acknowledging the power of human agency to transform those conditions. Archer's work (1995) allows me to do this by according 'powers and properties' to both 'the parts' and 'the people'. Structural emergent properties (SEPs) are accorded to mechanisms in the domain of structure, cultural emergent properties (CEPs) in the domain of culture and personal emergent properties (PEPs) in the domain of agency. The accordance of these properties to the separate domains allows us to examine the way they operate independently and in interplay with each other. At any one time, SEPs, CEPs and PEPs can be active or dormant. Importantly, Archer shows how human beings, through the exercise of reflexivity or the 'inner conversation' (2000: 315), exercise their PEPs to pursue concerns and projects that they have identified. The exercise of this agency involves drawing on, and therefore activating, CEPs and SEPs that might otherwise lie dormant. In the case of my study, an individual (lecturer, head of department or dean) might identify a concern with, say, academic standards and identify a project to enhance these. Through the 'inner conversation', he/she would then exercise agency to draw on CEPs (typically by drawing on sets of ideas which construct standards in particular ways) and SEPs (possibly a position as head of department or a policy about assessment) to contribute to the emergence of events (for example, the use of different kinds of assessment) at the level of the Actual. This would then lead to the emergence of experiences and observations about standards at the level of the Empirical.

The use of Archer's social theory allows me to understand social change in the context of a specific time period through the use of the morphogenetic framework. It is to this that I now turn.

2.3.2 The morphogenetic framework

As already indicated, Archer's (1995) morphogenetic framework allows social theorists to analyse the interplay between human beings and the structural and cultural contexts in which they find themselves over time. This then allows us to account for why change (morphogenesis) or non-change (morphostasis) happens. Archer claims that morphogenesis (change or elaboration) and morphostasis (non-change or reproduction) occur in an endless recurring cycle. This is illustrated in the following diagram:

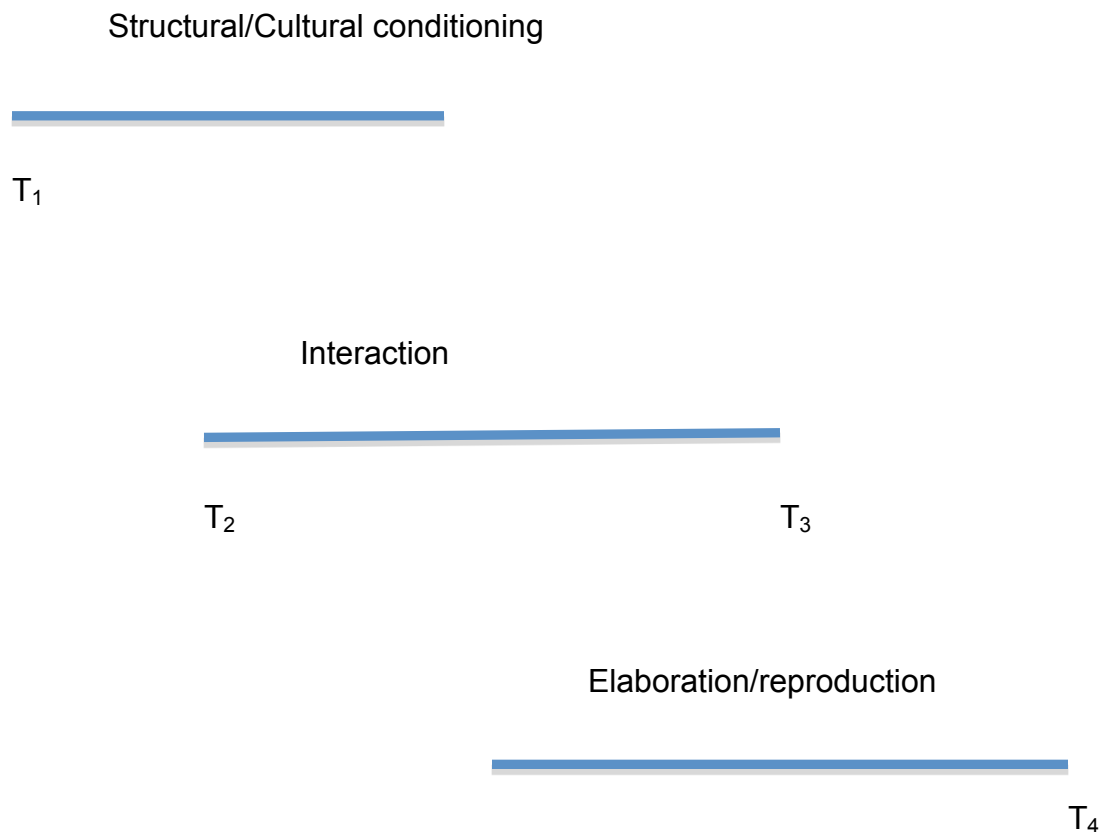


Figure 1: The morphogenetic cycle, adapted from Archer (1995: 193)

In the cycle, T₁ is the period of time that pre-exists the moment of interaction between 'the people' and 'the parts'. Archer (1996: xxv) argues that agents are born into a situation of which they did not influence the make up. They are then conditioned into structures and cultures which are not of their own making. Although agents are

conditioned by the structures and cultures they encounter, they do have the power to exercise agency in terms of what they choose to do in those contexts. Archer identifies reflexivity, which takes place by means of the 'inner conversation', as the means by which they choose what to do and what not to do.

T_2 – T_3 is the period of time when agents begin to interact with the structural and cultural systems in the contexts in which they find themselves. Quinn and Boughey (2009: 267) explain Archer's T_2 – T_3 as a period when individuals and groups of people respond to inherited constraining and enabling structural and cultural contexts. It is important to acknowledge that during this stage the way in which agents respond to the structures and cultures is also influenced by the positions they hold. That is, the kind of agency exercised will always be conditioned by roles. Archer (1995: 79) argues that voluntarism is critical in morphogenesis but this is always influenced by structural and cultural constraints.

At T_4 , we realise a period of time that shows elaboration or reproduction and which also forms the beginning of a new morphogenetic cycle.

In the context of this study, the use of the morphogenetic cycle entails understanding that 'the people' (i.e. lecturers, heads of department and deans who agreed to participate in my research) are the objects of social and cultural conditioning. This conditioning has taken place at a number of levels and over time. In Chapter Five of this thesis, I will therefore try to explore this conditioning. T_2 – T_3 requires an exploration of the way the participants in the study have interacted with policies and procedures intended to assure quality in the period since quality assurance was introduced. In critical realist terms, this exploration takes place at the level of the Empirical. My role as a researcher is to move from this level to the level of the Real in order to identify the underlying structures and mechanisms which have led to the emergence of the actions, experiences and observations they describe. This is done by using a number of analytical tools, including abduction and retroduction. Abduction involves a

...move from a conception of something to a different, possibly more developed or deeper conception of it. This happens through our placing and interpreting the original ideas about the phenomenon in the frame of a new set of ideas.

(Danermark et al., 2002: 91)

This placing in a 'frame of a new set of ideas' thus involves the use of theory to 'see' the phenomenon differently. Retroduction is defined by Meyer and Lunnay (2013: 5) as 'a method of conceptualising which requires the researcher to identify the circumstances without which something (the concept) cannot exist'. Retroduction thus involves asking what Bhaskar (1979: 23) terms the 'transcendental question' of 'What must the world be like for science to be possible?' In practical terms, this involves asking about the interplay of structures and mechanisms at the level of the Real since it is the existence of these structures and mechanisms and their interplay which leads to the emergence of events at the level of the Actual and experiences and observations at the level of the Empirical. A researcher thus moves from the experiences, observations and events recorded in empirical data to infer the interplay of structures and mechanisms from which they must have emerged.

2.3.3 The morphogenetic analysis of culture

I have already explored Archer's (1996) concept of 'analytical dualism', which requires the temporal, and artificial, separation of 'the people' from 'the parts' for the purposes of analysis. Archer (1996: xi) argues for the necessity of further separating 'the parts' – i.e. for analysing culture and structure separately. A failure to engage in such separation is termed by Archer (1996: xv) as the 'fallacy of conflation' and is understood to lead to 'epiphenomenalism', or one element being elevated to a more prominent position whilst the other suffers elision. The conflation of structure and culture, for example, would thus lead to culture being subsumed by structure (or vice versa)³. Avoiding this fallacy entails

³ The conflation of 'the parts' with 'the people' leads to structure and culture being subsumed by agency (or vice versa). I have already discussed the conflation of 'the parts' and 'the people' in Section 2.3.2 above.

linking structure and agency, or culture and agency, rather than sinking the difference between them. Archer thus argues for structure and culture to be analysed by means of their own independent morphogenetic cycles.

Archer (1996: 2) contends that, as a concept in sociology, culture has been defined in an implicit manner and, as a result, it does not occupy a clear place in sociological analysis. According to Archer,

. . . [w]hat culture is and what culture does are issues bogged down in a conceptual morass from which no adequate sociology of culture has been able to emerge.

Archer (1995: 195) argues that culture is responsible for bringing together structure and agency since it is ideas, beliefs, norms and values that influence people's dispositions towards the structures which constitute society. Beliefs about what it means to be a girl child or a woman, for example, influence dispositions towards gender-biased structures. In my own history, beliefs about what it meant to be a black person in the rural north of South Africa led to communities living under apartheid without resistance. In sociological analysis, Archer therefore urges that the focus of exploration should be the interface between cultural system (at conditioning) and socio-cultural interaction.

A cultural system is composed of ideas, ideologies, values, theories and beliefs, some of which people are not necessarily aware of. Regardless of whether people are aware of ideas, beliefs, theories and values, these elements of a cultural system nonetheless condition their actions. As I have already indicated in Section 2.3.2 above, Archer accords emergent powers and properties to elements of a cultural system (CEPs). These CEPs exist in a cultural system regardless of whether or not anyone is aware of them and regardless of whether or not anyone activates them through the exercise of their agency. Archer (1996: 108) notes, for example, 'as a CEP [cultural emergent property], a souffle recipe might not have been used by anyone living, but would still work for the cook who eventually tried it'.

Following Archer (1996), Boutillier (2003: 70) notes that a cultural system emerges from the socio-cultural interaction but, once emerged, it has an objective existence. It contains what Archer calls a 'propositional register' consisting of the entire stock of knowledge (theories, beliefs, values) informing a cultural context.

Archer (1996: 106) explains elaboration or reproduction in a cultural system by means of the following four propositions:

1. Logical relationships exist between components of a cultural system
2. Causal influences are exerted on socio-cultural interaction by a cultural system (i.e. a cultural system influences people to act in certain ways)
3. There are causal relationships between groups and individuals at the level of socio-cultural interaction
4. Elaboration of the cultural system is the result of modification of current logical relations following on from socio-cultural interaction.

The distinction between a cultural system and socio-cultural interaction is important, because Archer conceptualises each as a different level of reality. Each, nonetheless, is understood to possess causal powers and properties which effect emergence. Since society is an open system, the interplay of agents and the cultural system at the level of socio-cultural interaction is always tendential and not strictly causal (Archer, 1995: 294).

As I have indicated, a cultural system comprises the beliefs, values, ideas and theories which influence human action. In my study, I define culture discursively where discourses are understood, following Kress (1989: 7) as:

. . . systematically organised sets of statements which give expression to the meanings and values of an institution. Beyond that, they define, describe and delimit what it is possible to say and not possible to say (and by extension – what it is possible to do or not to do) with respect to the area of concern of that institution, whether marginally or centrally.

As I explain in Chapter Four of this thesis, my analysis of the cultural system and of socio-cultural interaction involves a discourse analysis. Part of this analysis involves looking for contradictions and complementarities in the socio-cultural system – i.e. for ideas, theories and beliefs that contradict, and therefore clash, with each other and for those that complement each other. This activity speaks to the first of Archer's (1996: 106) propositions discussed above, namely that *logical* relationships exist between elements of a cultural system. The second proposition noted by Archer is that relationships between elements of a cultural system condition socio-cultural interaction. Thus part of my analysis looks at the way dominant discourses condition the way agents interact with policies and procedures related to quality assurance.

At T_4 in a morphogenetic cycle, it becomes possible to explore whether change (morphogenesis) or non-change (morphostasis) has occurred. The extent to which new ideas, values and beliefs (in the case of my study, ideas, values and beliefs related to quality assurance) have been incorporated into a cultural system is then indicative of change or non-change.

2.3.4 The morphogenetic analysis of structure

The morphogenetic analysis of structure follows a similar pattern to that of culture. As I have indicated earlier in this Chapter, Archer accords powers and properties to elements of a structural system (SEPs). According to Archer, 'CEPs and SEPs work in an identical manner as mediatory mechanisms, despite their substantive differences' (1995: 229). For Archer, SEPs are 'distributions, roles, institutional structures and social systems' (1995: 176). Although SEPs differ from CEPs, they are legitimated and maintained by elements of the cultural system. So, for example, in many contexts gender differences can be seen to be maintained by beliefs about women and their capabilities.

A morphogenetic analysis of the structural system begins at T_1 with an analysis of the structures conditioning human action. In the case of my study, many of these structures are institutional and relate to the way roles and activities are apportioned within the

University. These would include school and faculty structures, for example, as well as committee structures and policies. At the same time, it is also necessary to acknowledge structures outside the immediate institutional context. Historically, the structure of apartheid can be seen to have conditioned actions at The University of Venda. More recently, the introduction of a new funding system for South African public higher education in the early 2000s can also be seen to condition human action.

Archer explains that, at T_1 , structures shape ‘the situations which later “generations” of actors find themselves [in] and by endowing various agents with different vested interests according to the positions they occupy in the structures they “inherit” (1995: 90). At The University of Venda, this might mean that individuals find themselves in schools or departments which, in turn, have been shaped by the nature of the academic disciplines, and that individuals then are conditioned to act according to their position in this structure either as a head of department, a head of school or a junior lecturer.

T_2 – T_3 then requires an analysis of what Archer terms ‘social interaction’, or the interaction of individuals with the structures in which they find themselves. Between T_2 and T_3 , structures can be transformed as a result of this interaction, in which case morphogenesis would occur at T_4 . On the other hand, existing structures can be reinforced or maintained. In this case, morphostasis would be identified.

2.3.5 The morphogenetic analysis of agency

Archer (1996) also provides an account of the morphogenesis of agency. For Archer, agents are social beings born with a sense of self who come to occupy social roles over time. She argues that this sense of self is not socially constructed because it comes into existence prior to our socialisation (Archer, 2007: 121). Although the development of the sense of self takes place in the individual, this does not mean that structure and culture are not acknowledged, but only that the social is not key to this process (Archer, 2007: 125). Archer notes that the sense of self is more evident in infants. Babies, for instance, are more concerned with satisfying their physiological needs than the social conditions into which they are born. Regardless of whether it is possible to satisfy that

physiological need or not at a given time, all they want is to see their need fulfilled. This attitude is diluted as we become adult human beings. Although Archer emphasises the primacy of this sense of self, she also provides an account of agency in socio-cultural contexts (Archer, 1996).

Archer identifies three layers of agency: the person, the agent and the actor. The person, as already indicated, relates to the sense of self with which we are born. The agent and the actor then emerge as a result of interaction with social contexts. Archer (1996) distinguishes between two types of agents: primary and corporate agents. According to Archer (2000: 263), primary agents are 'collectivities sharing the same life chances'. A group of black working class students from rural backgrounds enrolled at The University of Venda could thus be considered primary agents. Primary agents can transform themselves into corporate agents in pursuit of change. They would do this by exercising the personal emergent powers and properties accorded to them by Archer in interaction with the cultural and structural emergent powers and properties they encounter. Archer (1995: 258) defines corporate agents as groups:

. . . who are aware of what they want, can articulate it to themselves and others, and have organised in order to get it, can engage in concerted action to re-shape or retain the structural or cultural feature in question.

A group of students at The University of Venda who organised themselves into some sort of association pressing for change could thus be considered as corporate agents and, indeed, South African higher education has seen numerous instances of this sort of morphogenesis of agency.

The final concept used by Archer (1996) in her account of agency is that of the social actor. Social actors are individuals who occupy roles which themselves have powers and properties which cannot be reduced to those of the person who occupies them. In an academic context, the role of head of department, dean or professor would all be examples of such roles. Although the roles have powers and properties, the social actor

exercises his/her incumbency of the role in different ways depending on his/her own powers and properties.

For Archer, an analysis of the morphogenesis of agency involves exploring how a group of primary agents first of all transform themselves into a cohesive group seeking change and, in the process, become corporate agents. Archer terms this process 'double morphogenesis'. However, an account of the morphogenesis of agency also needs to explore the way corporate agents become individual actors in order to effect change at systemic levels, a process termed by Archer (1996) 'triple morphogenesis'.

In the context of this study, Archer's concept of the 'social actor' is particularly important given the potential role to be played by individuals such as deans, heads of department and so on. Also of interest is that of corporate agents since, in my experience, entire departments will often show a resistance to requirements or innovations.

However, it is her ideas about the emergence of the sense of self in human beings that offer potential in understanding why quality assurance policies and procedures are not implemented at The University of Venda. Archer (2004: 121) advocates for the primacy of practice in the emergence of the sense of self in human beings. She argues that our natural embodiment takes centre place in shaping our well-being or in preparing us to integrate into the social world, because the sense of self and its distinction from otherness and from others is not dependent upon joining in society's conversations (Archer, 2000: 152). In the quest to understand why there are challenges connected to the implementation of quality assurance in higher education, despite the existence of well-crafted policies at institutional level and the existence of an external quality assurance body, Archer's claim of the primacy of practice over language (written or spoken) is particularly important. Archer (2000: 152) argues that the individual domain is not simply a lonely space but a very busy one where we owe our sense of self to its continuous nature and our reasoning because it does not depend on joining society for it to be different from others. The sense of self, moreover, is embedded in our eidetic memories and embedded in our procedural memories. In short, pre-verbal action is the source of basic principles of logical reasoning, which are prior to and necessary for

discursive socialisation. Since the development of the sense of self occurs prior to our sociality, one can understand why there are differences in human beings' approaches to new practices in a given social milieu, in this case the implementation of quality assurance policies in higher education. The existence of a private/individual domain means that, following Durkheim (quoted in Archer, 2000), all animals have the capacity to discern basic differences as experience changes or else they will not navigate around their natural environment; and more importantly our practical work in the world does not and cannot be patient and await social instruction. This implies that, as academics interpret quality assurance policies, they do not spontaneously implement what the policies advice but rather the sense of self takes charge of the situation in one way or the other.

In the context of this study, Archer's work on the sense of self allows me to make sense of individual, non-socialised, responses to the need to implement quality assurance policies and procedures

2.3.6 Reflexivity and internal conversation

As I have already indicated, Archer's work on agency encompasses the notion of an 'internal conversation' which allows individuals to map out projects which will address particular constraints and which will also allow them to negotiate enablements and constraints encountered along the way. Archer (2007: 5) argues that:

. . . the subjective powers of reflexivity mediate the role that objective structural or cultural powers play in influencing social action and are thus indispensable to explaining social outcomes.

Because of the primacy of the sense of self, Archer (2007) proposes that, when we are confronted with structural constraints (or enablements), agents deliberate reflexively through internal conversations and decide how to respond or react to objective circumstances that are not of their own making.

In a longitudinal study she conducted in her quest to understand people's concerns and their contexts, Archer (2007) identifies four modes of reflexives. These are communicative reflexives, autonomous reflexives, meta-reflexives and fractured reflexives. I briefly discuss each kind of reflexive here although I am mindful of the fact that the identification of these four types took place in a context which is very different to the one in which this study is located.

The first reflexives identified by Archer (2007) are 'communicative reflexives'. For communicative reflexives, internal conversations require completion and confirmation by others before a course of action is taken. Communicative reflexives are people who think and talk to themselves about a matter and then consult friends or colleagues before they make up their minds about taking action on the issue. One commendable thing about this kind of person is that they do not do things in a rush. They think and consult others before a final decision is made. The downside of this kind of reflexive is that the person cannot move forward until they speak to someone they trust. With regard to academics who are communicative reflexives, the concern would be that they might not easily take a decision to take up requirements outlined in quality assurance policies without waiting for colleagues and others to approve their action. Communicative reflexives do not trust their instincts or allow their instincts to work for them. This might mean that, even if instinctively they thought that some of the procedures outlined in policies could contribute to enhanced policy, they might not adopt those procedures without the approval of others in their department or school.

Archer's second type of reflexives are 'autonomous reflexives'. Autonomous reflexives' internal conversations automatically lead to action. According to Archer (2007), autonomous reflexives have a personal generative power that encourages social mobility. This is in contrast to communicative reflexives, who are generally content with social immobility. Archer (ibid) further states that this group of people are interested in monitoring their employment context rather than monitoring how they perform a given

job. Autonomous reflexives are quick to conclude a thought and then take action. They are self-reliant. Archer argues that autonomous reflexives do not simply join a social context but are selective, evaluative and elective about the world they chose to join. In the context of this study, autonomous reflexives might be predicted to take independent 'maverick' actions with regard to the need to comply with quality assurance policies in the face of potential opposition from those in the immediate contexts in which they work.

The third type of reflexive identified by Archer is the 'meta-reflexive'. A meta-reflexive's internal conversation involves a great deal of critical thinking. This critical thinking then informs decisions regarding action. Archer describes meta-reflexives as 'the well spring of society's self-criticism'. As I will indicate in Chapter Three of this thesis, quality assurance has received a great deal of criticism from academics, most notably because of its relationship with globalisation, managerialism and surveillance (see, for example, Shore and Wright, 1999). In the context of this study, it could well be the case that meta-reflexives would bring this sort of criticality to considerations of quality assurance and that this might well lead them to resist the need to take up policies and procedures.

Archer's final type of reflexive is the 'fractured reflexive'. Fractured reflexives tend to be confused about their thoughts and this may lead to distress and disorientation. As a result, they have great difficulty in taking decisions. In the context of this study, this might indicate individuals who are confused about the need to assure quality, who do not see the part they need to play in enhancing learning environments and who then 'dither' and fail to act on quality assurance policies.

Badat (2008: 3) supports the idea that human agency is critical to institutional change. He argues that human agency, as opposed to social structure, affects the pace, nature and outcomes of institutional change. Archer (2000: 160) argues that, although natural or artefactual realities have properties and powers to change things, the most powerful change agents are humans. Archer's social theory therefore places human agency at the centre of change. Through the exercise of the personal powers and properties (PEPs) human beings can activate powers and properties in both the structural and cultural domains. This means that they can, for example, 'activate' a policy on quality assurance (which in social realist terms would be understood as having its own

structural powers and properties). In doing this they would draw on ideas, values and beliefs discursively constituted in the cultural domain. One set of discourses they might draw on, for example, might relate to the need for black working class students to be provided with quality learning experiences leading to better success, throughput and graduation rates. Through the exercise of their PEPs, they might therefore activate SEPs related to the policy and CEPs related to the discourse. This might then lead to the emergence of different practices in respect of teaching and learning (conceptualised as events at the level of the Actual) and different experiences and observations of teaching and learning on the part of both students and academics at the level of the Empirical. The exercise of these PEPs would, however, be mediated by an internal conversation.

The introduction of quality assurance in higher education should be viewed as a necessary and critical move, as higher education is seen as a fountain for socio-economic empowerment (Blackie, Case and Jawitz, 2010; Makhanya, 2013). Such social empowerment not only relates to the role graduates can play in the workplace but also to the criticality they can bring to society more generally. Archer's social theory allows us to begin to understand how and why, in the face of such an imperative, quality assurance procedures and policies are not always taken up by those working with students.

CHAPTER THREE: THE EVOLUTION OF QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I attempt to provide an account of evolution of quality assurance in higher education with specific reference to the quality of teaching and learning. In doing this, I attempt to analyse what brought the institution which is the focus of my study, The University of Venda, to introduce quality assurance. I do this by providing a history of quality assurance at an international level before moving to the South African context.

My discussion pays particular attention to the claim, made in the literature (see Allais, 2014; Harvey and Knight, 1996; Luckett, 2006; Morley, 2003; Shore and Wright, 1999, 2000), that mechanisms and procedures intended to assure quality largely fail to tackle the quality of teaching and learning because of their roots in attempts to assure quality in business and industry. The two most widely recognised performance areas for academics are teaching and learning and research. In attempts to assure quality, the area of teaching and learning arguably lags behind that of research. Henard and Leprince-Ringuet (2008: 3) argue that one of the reasons for this is because the measurement of teaching and learning in the classroom is incredibly complex. In comparison, it is relatively easy to measure the quality of research as this can be done by, for example, looking at citation indices for publications and applications for applied research.

The chapter begins by discussing the history of quality assurance in industry, a phenomenon which later penetrated higher education due to the rise of globalisation and neoliberalism. This is followed by discussion of quality assurance systems in higher education internationally. The chapter then moves on to critiques of quality assurance in higher education with particular reference to the 'political technologies' (Shore and Wright, 1999, 2000). I then critique definitions of quality and quality assurance in higher education and consequently suggest a redefinition of these concepts.

Having dealt with what might be termed more 'philosophical' issues, the chapter then takes up a more practical stance in its discussion of the South African quality assurance trajectory up to where it is today. I end in this practical vein by looking at the introduction of quality assurance at The University of Venda, the University on which this study is focused.

3.2 The evolution of quality assurance in higher education

Attempts to introduce quality management systems in higher education have been evident since the late 20th century. The literature reports that quality management practices in higher education were first introduced in 1985 by two colleges in the United States of America, and in the late 1980s to early 1990s in the United Kingdom (Owilia and Aspinwall, 1997: 5). Doherty (2012: 78) points out that higher education remained untouched by governments for years after World War II. However, concerns about the maintenance of educational standards, education and employability and the provision of 'value for money' began brewing in the mid-1970s in America. These concerns were indicative of a shifting relationship between higher education and the state and higher education and society, which were exacerbated by the massification of higher education and globalisation. I will return to these points later in this chapter but, for now, turn to a discussion of the emergence of quality assurance in industry in order to try to trace its penetration into the higher education sector.

3.2.1 The introduction of quality audit in industry

According to Mandru, Patrasku and Carstea (2011), the origins of quality assurance can be traced to the emergence of the concept of Total Quality Control, developed in 1961 by an American mathematician named Armand Feigenbaum. Total Quality Management then developed from Total Quality Control in industrial management in the 1980s. The International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO) (see, for example, ISO 2000:10) defines Total Quality Management as

. . . a management approach of an organization, centred on quality, based on the participation of all its members and aiming at long term success through

customer satisfaction and benefits to the members of the organisation and to the society.

Edwards Deming, a statistician working in the USA, is often cited as the 'father' of the quality management movement. Deming (1982) argues that a lack of quality more often than not results from failures in management and not as a result of carelessness on the part of workers. The failures in management identified by Deming related to the need to check quality at every step of the production process rather than simply to check the product once completed.

Deming's work is complemented by that of Crosby (1967), who argues that quality results from 'conformance to requirements', that the performance standard is 'zero defects' and that a quality management system focuses on prevention. This then allows him to claim that 'quality is free' as the cost of prevention is lower than the cost of detection and remediation.

The work of Deming and Crosby (and others such as Feigenbaum, 1961), with its focus on the management and control of quality in production processes, is widely credited with the success of the Japanese economy post World War II. It is not hard to see, however, that the application of principles and theories, developed in industry, to higher education is likely to be fraught with problems given the very different context of a university to a factory.

Ideas related to quality management were, however, to become increasingly important in higher education as the 20th century wore on because of the impact of globalisation and the rise of neo-liberalism. It is to this phenomenon I now turn my discussion.

3.2.2 Globalisation, neo-liberalism and new public management

Badat (2009: 458) states that 'institutional change in higher education has occurred in an epoch of globalisation and in a conjuncture of the dominance of the ideology of neo-liberalism'. According to Badat (2008: 5 and 2009: 458), neo-liberal thinking and ideas are hegemonic and, whether embraced voluntarily or through the coercive or

disciplinary power of financial institutions, these have impacted on economic and social policies, institutions and practices, including those of universities.

Nayyar (2008: 4, cited in Badat 2010) defines globalisation as characterised by 'an expansion of economic activities across national boundaries' and 'flows of services, technology, information and ideas'. Closely associated with globalisation is the idea of the 'knowledge economy' (Castells, 2001), where the creation of wealth and economic prosperity is dependent on knowledge and understanding.

The knowledge economy and the 'high skills thesis' associated with it (Finegold and Soskice, 1988), or the idea that economic growth at a national level is dependent on the availability of 'high skills' furthered by a raft of supportive policies, have had profound implications for higher education. The need for 'high skills', often expressed as the need for 'knowledge workers', or individuals who can work in the research and design of new products produced across global networks, has brought unprecedented demand for the qualifications offered by higher education. The idea that employment is not possible without a degree now dominates much popular discourse regardless of location and, as a result, large numbers of young people have flooded into universities. These new entrants to higher education are often 'first generation' undergraduates, that is, they are the first of their families to enter higher education. These 'non-traditional' students bring experiences, understandings and ways of being which are alien into universities.

Trow (2000 in Beerkens-Soo and Vossensteyn, 2009) notes three phases in the massification of higher education: an elite system (with participation at less than 15 % of the age group typically associated with higher education), mass higher education (with participation between 15 and 50%) and universal higher education (participation more than 50%). As participation grows, typically so too do concerns about quality. Doherty (2012: 78) notes that the then UK Prime Minister, James Callaghan, raised concerns about the quality of higher education as growth in the British higher education system took off in the 1970s. Ahmed (2008) states that the transition of higher education from the elite and exclusive, to the mass and inclusive, has transformed its relationship with

the society that it serves. Arguably one way this has happened relates to a lack of trust, at least in popular discourse, in the idea that quality can be maintained. While higher education is elite and for the privileged few, like 'luxury goods', an aura of quality is created. Once greater access is allowed, that aura is diminished.

At the same time as demand for higher education has grown, other phenomena associated with globalisation have also impacted on universities across the world. The relaxation of controls for trade across national boundaries associated with globalisation has meant that universities themselves have been able to 'trade' globally, offering qualifications beyond the boundaries of the countries in which they are located. This has been achieved through the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) associated with the growth of the worldwide web, although many institutions of higher education have now established campuses outside the boundaries of the countries in which they were founded. Such 'cross-border' provision means that a university may be operating in a very different context to the one to which its staff are accustomed.

Associated with the spread of higher education across the world has been the establishment of national qualification frameworks and credit transfer systems (Allais, 2014). In principle, these frameworks and credit transfer systems allow learners to 'bank' learning and then use it either to gain access to programmes leading to a qualification or to actually transfer that learning, in the form of credits, into qualifications other than those for which they were originally registered. Clearly, when learning is being accredited and transferred in this way, concerns about quality will arise and need to be addressed.

The impact of all this has been to construct higher education as an 'economic activity' which can be bought by student 'clients' who pay fees. The role of 'high skills' in knowledge economies means that qualifications gained from higher education institutions will often command a premium in the job market and open up avenues for employment not possible for those without the benefit of a degree or diploma.

At this point, neo-liberalism comes into play. Neo-liberalism is understood as:

. . . a theory of political economic practices proposing that human well-being can best be advanced by the maximization of entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework characterized by private property rights, individual liberty, unencumbered markets, and free trade. (Harvey, 2007: 22).

In relation to higher education, the concept of 'individual entrepreneurial freedoms' allows the state to assume less responsibility for the funding of higher education, which, in any case, is constructed as a 'private good' because of the benefits assumed to accrue to individuals by virtue of having a qualification. In practical terms, this means that, across the globe, funding for higher education systems has decreased in real terms. This then leads to the idea that universities are increasingly being called upon to 'do more with less', that is, to educate ever-growing numbers of students, who may be less prepared for higher education by virtue of their status as first generation entrants, with ever-decreasing state funding. The implications for concerns for quality are then obvious.

One final set of ideas related to the introduction of quality assurance in higher education can be conceptualised under the umbrella term of 'New Public Management' (NPM). NPM is often associated with the Conservative government led by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom in the 1980s, although the term was formally conceptualised by Hood (1991). NPM involves the development of policy aimed at modernisation in order to make the public sector more efficient, in the belief that market-oriented management of the public sector will lead to reduced costs for governments and increased efficiency. Ferlie, Ashburner, Fitzgerald and Pettigrew (1996) describe NPM as involving 'the three Ms' of markets, managers and measurement.

It is not hard to see how NPM interacts with the concepts of globalisation and neo-liberalism discussed above. Globalisation creates markets; neo-liberalism introduces the idea of reduced state intervention. This then creates the need for managers and the measurement associated with accountability.

3.3 Quality assurance and higher education

Harvey and Green (1993: 5) identify four reasons for the rapid expansion of quality assurance debates in higher education in Britain, which draw on the concepts discussed in Section 3.2.2 above:

1. The rapid expansion of student numbers
2. The general quest for better public services
3. Increasing competition within the educational 'market' for resources and students
4. The tension between efficiency and quality.

Ahmed (2008: 9) points to the new calibre of stakeholders that higher education is expected to satisfy. These include first generation graduates, employers recruiting graduates for the labour market for the first time and mature students looking to higher education to equip them with skills for rapidly changing job prospects. These people all require some measure of confidence in higher education, especially since higher education institutions have themselves changed, thanks in part to differentiation in higher education systems. Higher education systems have seen changes to institutional types with, for example, 'polytechnics' in the United Kingdom and 'technikons' in South Africa taking university status and, in addition in the South African case at least, being further differentiated by the category of 'university of technology'.

For all the reasons cited thus far, higher education as a sector has been forced to embrace the concept of quality assurance in the face of critiques that traditional academic 'controls' are inadequate in the face of contemporary challenges and that greater assurance about quality is required (Mizikaci, 2006: 38).

If higher education systems and the universities which comprise them are going to assure quality, it is first necessary to have a definition of quality with which to work. It is to this that I now turn.

3.4 Quality assurance defined and redefined in higher education

Harvey and Green's (1993) seminal paper on defining quality in higher education begins by making the point that quality 'means different things to different people' (1993 :9). They further argue that, if quality means different things to different people, it means the concept is relative in two senses: that is, relative to the user and to the circumstance in which it is being used.

According to Harvey and Green (ibid.), the concept of quality can be defined in five discrete but interrelated ways: (i) quality as exceptional, (ii) quality as perfection, (iii) quality as fitness for purpose, (iv) quality as value for money and, finally, (v) quality as transformative. I will discuss each of these in turn.

3.4.1 Quality as exceptional

Quality can be defined as exceptional, meaning that it can be viewed as something that is out of the ordinary or special. Harvey and Green (ibid.) identify three variations of the understanding of quality as something exceptional. The first variation, which they term a 'traditional' notion, involves understanding quality as something which is high class and which confers distinction. In higher education, this variation would be associated with universities such as Oxford or Cambridge, Ivy League institutions in the United States or, in contemporary South Africa, with some historically white universities. Distinction is related to inaccessibility. Thus an education at one of these universities is understood to be of quality because it is accessible to only a few. Harvey and Green term this understanding of quality 'apodictic' – as something which is instantly recognisable or instantly known. As such, quality does not need to be defined.

The second variation of quality as exceptional involves an understanding of quality as embodied in excellence. For Harvey and Green (ibid.), a notion of quality as excellence is similar to quality as exceptional but is not apodictic – that is, it is able to identify the 'components' of excellence. These components are, however, unattainable for the masses. In higher education, an understanding of quality as excellence might involve being lectured by the very best academics and having access to the best possible resources. It would also mean admitting only the very 'best' students. If these 'input' factors are understood to be in place, then quality outputs are understood to be

guaranteed.

The final variation of quality as exceptional identified by Harvey and Green involves something that has passed a series of quality checks and meets a set of required standards. In higher education, such a view of quality would often be related to assessment, and the understanding that assessments need to be rigorous and 'difficult'. This sort of approach to quality is often associated with 'standards', with no requirement for those standards to be absolute as different standards can be developed for different contexts. This measurement against standards would then allow for performance against them with, as Harvey and Green (citing Oakland, 1989) point out, it being 'perfectly possible to have a poor quality Rolls Royce and a high quality Mini'.

3.4.2 Quality as perfection

Quality viewed as perfection involves the production of a zero-defect product or service. This, in turn, involves the notion of prevention rather than inspection, and is bound up with the concept of a 'quality culture'. A 'quality culture' involves a devolution or transfer of responsibility for quality in an organisation to those involved in 'production'. Problems about applying this sort of understanding of quality to higher education are not difficult to identify as it is very difficult to talk about 'zero defects' in relation to graduates, given the huge variety in human nature and ability.

3.4.3 Quality as fitness for purpose

Quality as fitness for purpose focuses on the idea of a product or service being relevant to the context in which it will be used. For instance, a modern electronic gadget might not be 'fit for purpose' in a remote rural area lacking electricity. Similarly, a pair of ballet shoes would not be fit for the purpose of climbing a mountain. In the case of higher education, the idea of quality as involving fitness for purpose focuses on considerations of the way an institution is ready or able to achieve the goals and role it has identified for itself in a higher education system. At programme level, quality as fitness for purpose would involve asking questions about the extent to which a programme is able to produce the kind of graduates it claims will result from it.

Drawing on definitions of quality as fitness for purpose might involve considering wider philosophical questions related to the role of higher education itself or the purpose of a university. As Harvey and Green (ibid.) point out, however, understandings of quality as fitness for purpose also involve asking questions about 'whose purpose?'. It would be possible, for example, for the purpose to be defined by customers or consumers of the product – that is, for the customers to determine the specifications of a product. In relation to higher education, this is clearly problematic as, for a large part, the 'customers' are students, the state or society more generally. The interests of these very different stakeholders may well clash, not only with each other but with the interests of academics and the institution itself. In addition, some stakeholders, most notably students, may not be in a position to be able to determine their requirements for a product or service as these will occur in a future which they can only glimpse. The association of an understanding of quality as fitness for purpose with customer specifications is therefore clearly problematic in a higher education context, a point made most forcibly by Harvey and Green (ibid.).

Such problems, as Harvey and Green also point out, can be avoided by turning to the institution in response to the question 'whose purpose?'. From this perspective, quality can be seen to involve meeting the purposes an institution or programme has set for itself. In practice, quality assurance then means examining the processes in place to allow the institution or programme to achieve that purpose and ensuring that they are indeed 'fit'.

For reasons I have tried to indicate in this section thus far, understandings of quality as involving fitness for purpose have been adopted widely in higher education across the world although, as I will show in relation to the introduction of quality assurance to South African higher education, they may be combined with other definitions of quality or aspects of those definitions.

3.4.4 Quality as value for money

Quality can also be defined as value for money. Harvey and Green (ibid.) consider this to be a 'populist' view of quality involving the idea of 'you get what you pay for' although it can also include understandings of high quality at a low cost. The NPM movement,

discussed above, with its focus on efficiency, has brought the idea of quality as value for money into sharp focus in relation to higher education as governments have tried to reduce funding, arguing that universities need to provide value to the taxpayers who subsidise them. This sort of understanding of quality then calls for the analysis of performance data and the use of performance indicators in order to show that what is being produced is sufficient to merit the money being spent.

3.4.5 Quality as transformation

The final understanding of quality offered by Harvey and Green encompasses the idea of qualitative change. In the higher education context, this transformation is most commonly taken to involve the student, who is 'enhanced' or 'empowered' by his/her experience at university although, in the South African context, it has also involved the notion of institutions going through the transformation needed to make the higher education system more equitable following the advent of democracy.

3.4.6 More on defining quality

Garvin (1988) classifies definitions of quality into five major categories:

- Transcendental definitions, which are subjective and personal. They are eternal but go beyond measurement and logical description and are related to concepts such as beauty and love.
- Product-based definitions, which see quality as a measurable variable. The bases for measurement are objective attributes of the product.
- User-based definitions, which regard the notion of customer satisfaction highly. This makes these definitions individual and partly subjective.
- Manufacturing-based definitions, which see quality as involving conformance to requirements and specifications.
- Value-based definitions, which define quality in relation to costs.

The following table maps Garvin's classification onto Harvey and Green's five definitions:

Definitions of Quality	
Harvey and Green (1993)	Garvin (1988)
Quality as exceptional	Transcendental definition
Quality as perfection	Transcendental definition
Quality as fitness for purpose	User-based definition
Quality as value for money	Value-based definition
Quality as transformative	Transcendental definition

It will be seen from the table above, that ‘transcendental’ definitions of quality appear to predominate and, as such, are indicative of the elusive nature of quality as constructed in discourse.

Wicks and Roethlein (2009) conducted a study to investigate major definitions of quality in all sectors. They found that the one commonality that all the definitions of quality have was the matter of satisfaction. They discovered that, regardless of whether an organisation is involved in manufacturing a product or providing a service, understandings of quality move in the direction of satisfying the customer. Lagrosen (2001, cited in Wicks and Roethlein, 2009) argues that it is critical to define quality according to the features of an organisation that create customer satisfaction.

In the context of higher education, the notion of ‘customer satisfaction’ is highly problematic. If students are considered to be the ‘customers’, then their satisfaction could easily be achieved with less demanding courses and assessment that was less than rigorous. Similarly, the satisfaction of other stakeholders could be achieved, in the case of employers and, arguably, the state, by a focus on vocational programmes which produce workers for the knowledge economy. Both of these examples can be seen to be dangerous for what is often cited as the ‘academic project’ although that ‘project’ is also notoriously hard to define.

Other quality experts in higher education such as Coates (2005) see the need to go beyond simply defining the meaning of quality to also providing indicators of quality. Coates argues, for example, that quality assurance considerations should take account of how and to what extent students engage with activities that are likely to lead to productive learning. Other indicators identified by Coates (2007) include graduation rates, graduate destinations, data on student diversity, and work readiness surveys, as well as data intended to indicate the quality of teaching staff (such as the proportion possessing doctoral degrees) and data related to the management of courses. The use of these indicators makes assumptions about quality, for example that a 'quality' university will prepare its students for the world of work and that a good academic teacher has a doctoral degree. As a result, indicator-based approaches can be seen to map on to deeper, underlying constructions of quality.

Harman and Meek (2000: iv) define quality assurance in higher education as the

. . . systematic management and assessment procedures adopted by a higher education institution or system to monitor performance and to ensure achievement of quality outputs or improved quality. Quality assurance aims to give stakeholders confidence about the management of quality and the outcomes achieved.

This definition of quality assurance, along with any other, can be seen to be reliant on a definition of quality itself. The importance of defining quality is therefore paramount in any attempts to assure it.

According to Reichert (2008: 5), '[q]uality assurance is so omnipresent and its vocabulary so pervasive nowadays in higher education policy and discourse that one forgets how relatively recent the enthronement of the term 'quality' actually is'. The problem would appear to be (and I will refer to this point in later chapters of this thesis reporting on my actual study) that this 'enthronement' has not always involved the insertion of understandings of the notion of quality itself.

As indicated earlier in this chapter, the understanding of quality which has been most widely used to inform the work of quality assurance agencies and institutional quality management offices is arguably that of 'fitness for purpose'. If this is the case, how does this understanding of quality impact on practices used to assure quality in higher education? It is to a discussion of practice that I now turn.

3.5 Quality assurance practices in higher education

Bogue (2002) outlines the different sets of practices related to the assurance of quality as typically encompassing institutional audits, accreditation and programme reviews. I will discuss these in turn.

3.5.1 Institutional audits

As I have indicated earlier in this chapter, the impact of globalisation has brought an increase in the demand for higher education across the world. As a result, participation rates have increased and higher education systems have grown. This has resulted in institutions of higher education growing in size, and also in a growth in the number of institutions comprising a system. Much of this growth has taken place in private higher education as increasing numbers of 'for profit' institutions enter the higher education market. This, coupled with the cross-border provision noted earlier in this chapter, has brought calls for institutions of higher education themselves to be subject to quality assurance.

The assurance of quality at institutional level generally involves an 'audit' or review of the mechanisms an institution has put in place to allow it to assure quality for itself. If 'fitness for purpose' is used as a definition of quality, then an institutional audit or review looks at the extent to which internal mechanisms ensure that an institution is able to achieve that purpose. For example, if a university defined its purpose as being a world-renowned research university focusing on the production of knowledge and postgraduate students, then a review would look at the extent to which organisational mechanisms allowed it to do just that. One such mechanism might involve the recruitment of renowned researchers in certain fields. Another might

involve the provision of supervision to large numbers of graduate students and the management of that supervision.

Typically, national quality assurance agencies develop sets of criteria or indicators for institutional audits and reviews. These criteria are generally located in a number of 'areas'. One area might be teaching and learning. Another would be research. In the Framework for Institutional Audits (South African Council on Higher Education, 2004c), teaching and learning related criteria then pertained to i) general quality-related arrangements for teaching and learning, ii) quality-related arrangements for programme development, management and review, and iii) quality-related arrangements for student assessment and success. An example of a criterion in ii) in the South African framework is

. . . [c]lear and efficient systems and procedures are in place for the design and approval of new programmes, courses and modules. The requirements are consistently applied and regularly monitored.

An audit would usually involve the institution preparing some sort of document evaluating itself against these criteria. This self evaluation document then forms the basis for a process of scrutiny by an external panel. Typically, a panel would visit the institution to look for evidence for the claims made in the self evaluation document. This would usually involve interviewing members of staff and students.

On the basis of this scrutiny process, a report is then prepared. Depending on the national system, judgements may be made about the institution under review and action may be required to be taken.

Institutional audits are high stakes activities for the universities as consequences for a poor review can be severe. However, audit panels also need to be cognisant of the rights of many universities, which are often founded by charter and which have large measures of autonomy. The extent to which an audit can have 'teeth' therefore depends on the national system and the status of the University.

3.5.2 Accreditation and programme reviews

The growth of demand for higher education has not only resulted in an increase in the number of providers of higher education but also in the number of programmes⁴ offered. In addition, the call on universities and other institutions of higher education to provide workers for the global economy means that many of the programmes offered are now vocational in nature. Vocational programmes can be multi-disciplinary in nature operating over the boundaries of traditional academic departments. All this has implications for quality assurance.

Accreditation or programme reviews involve the evaluation of a programme against a set of criteria set either by a national quality assurance agency or by a professional body (in the case of health and engineering councils, for example). Accreditation processes allow the programme to be offered. Reviews check on the quality of an existing programme.

Bogue (1998: 10) argues that programme reviews are often criticised by academics. The review process usually involves the development of some sort of document detailing the programme, in the case of accreditation, or self-evaluating the programme, in the case of review. These documents are then scrutinised by a panel against published criteria and evidence is sought to substantiate the claims made about the programme in question.

It is in programme accreditation and review that what Bennett and Brady (2014) term the ‘Learning Outcomes Assessment Movement’ comes into play in quality assurance mechanisms and procedures. According to Bennett and Brady (ibid.: 147), Learning Outcomes and Assessment (LOA) involves:

. . . teachers and administrators at colleges and universities [being] asked to articulate the goals, objectives, measures, and outcomes of the educational

⁴ A ‘programme’ is generally understood to encompass the learning experiences offered to students in order to allow them to achieve a qualification.

process at every level: from the classroom to the department to the institution as a whole. Educators engage in this process with the help of curriculum mapping or educational matrices or a host of other tools and templates provided by any number of readily available frameworks (see the website of the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment for many examples). The information gathered is then used to evaluate curricula, programs, instructors, and institutions for purposes of internal review and external evaluation.

Critiques of programme review and accreditation processes made by academics often focus on their ability to check what goes on in classrooms. A set of documentation describes a programme using LOA but, unless more in-depth scrutiny of teaching and learning takes place, the extent to which accreditation and review processes can assure that students' learning experiences will be of high quality is open to question.

3.6 Critiques of quality assurance

The most widespread critique of quality assurance is that it is a form of managerialism (see, for example, Shore and Wright, 2000), which arguably sits ill with traditional forms of academic governance.

Deem (1998, in Morley, 2003: viii) argues that the rise of academic management, the association of higher education with consumerism, and concerns about the practical value of higher education, as well as other political concerns, have resulted in the development of new organisational cultures and professional priorities. For Deem, given that quality assurance is concerned with fitness for purpose, the critical question is 'whether quality technologies are fit for academic purposes'.

As already indicated, quality assurance was introduced into higher education from the business sector. While management sits well in business and is seen as part of the quest for profit, in higher education, where governance has traditionally taken the form of rule through consensus, quality assurance can be viewed, as Power (1994: 19) notes, as the 'control of control'.

Shore and Wright (1999) argue for an understanding of quality assurance as a form of governmentality (Foucault, 1991 quoted in Shore and Wright, 1999) involving academics policing themselves, noting (1999: 559) that claims made by advocates of auditing 'enable' individuals and institutions to 'monitor' and 'enhance' their own performance and 'quality', thus to be judged by standards and targets that they set for themselves. For Shore and Wright (2000: 57), audit technologies are not simply neutral and legal-rational practices in higher education. Rather, they vehemently change our thinking and our moral behaviour in the academy. For Shore and Wright, it is critical for academics to guard against viewing quality assurance at face value but rather to move towards a critical analysis of the meaning hidden behind the concepts.

The net result of this, according to Shore and Wright (2000: 566), is the 'displacement of a system based on autonomy and trust by one based on visibility and coercive accountability'. They then go on to cite Power (1994: 13), who notes that 'the spread of audit actually creates the very distrust it is meant to address'.

Shore and Wright (2000) move to looking more closely at the impact of the introduction of quality assurance on different aspects of academic life. They note, for example, (2000: 73) that the introduction of quality assurance has meant that the meaning of 'teaching quality' has been transformed. Whereas, previously, teaching quality was defined in the sites where teaching took place, those responsible for defining quality teaching are now in management, far removed from classroom practices. As a result, 'quality teaching' is now defined by the mission statements developed by managers. Shore and Wright (ibid.) also identify the expense associated with the introduction of quality assurance, claiming that preparation for audits and reviews involves extensive paperwork, which is costly both financially and in terms of the number of hours expended on this activity. This time, they argue, could be better spent preparing for teaching and, thus, improving the quality of teaching.

Probably one of the most uncomfortable claims made by Shore and Wright (ibid.) in their critique of quality assurance relates to the development of a culture of fake practices in response to quality assurance demands. As indicated earlier in this chapter,

audit and review processes are usually based on the preparation of some sort of self evaluation document which audit and review panels then attempt to validate. This process of validation usually involves interviewing those employed by the institution or involved in running the programme. Shore and Wright cite instances of individuals being coached in what to say in these interviews in order to protect the reputation of the institution. They also note that most audit and review processes follow a 'paper trail' and, in the case of teaching at least, this can lead to panels looking at descriptions of teaching rather than teaching itself. Even when an attempt is made to validate actual teaching by visiting classes in progress, Shore and Wright claim that such classes are often 'staged' to allow the institution to present the best possible picture of itself.

While instances of 'staged' teaching may actually take place, I would argue it is possible to check the quality of teaching even without visiting actual classrooms. The use of learning outcomes was noted earlier in this chapter in relation to the Learning Outcomes Assessment Movement (LOA). The principle of 'alignment' involved in developing assessment criteria which are 'aligned' with learning outcomes is extended to the delivery of entire programmes, thanks to Biggs' (1999) principle of 'constructive alignment'. At programme level, constructive alignment involves 'aligning' all elements of a programme with the programme purpose. Thus, learning outcomes, assessment criteria, teaching approaches, learning materials and so on would all need to allow the programme to achieve its purpose. An audit panel could therefore look for examples of learning materials, which would indicate teaching approaches and so on, to gain insights into the quality of teaching which takes place. At institutional level, a similar process becomes possible by examining the implications for teaching of a university's vision and mission statement. A university which, for example, claims to want to serve local communities could be expected to include service learning as part of teaching provision so that the teaching itself is 'fit for purpose' (Boughey 2011: 4). This could then be checked by looking more closely at the programmes it offers and then using the principle of constructive alignment to scrutinise the programmes more closely.

Carrette (2005, in Whitchurch, 2007) characterises higher education management as an 'emerging' or 'post-emerging profession'. What Shore and Wright (1999) term 'the new

political technologies' associated with the surveillance they identify has, they claim, brought in a new cadre of experts in higher education; Shore and Wright (1999: 560) identify four categories of experts, namely: educational development consultants, quality assurance officers, staff development officers and teaching quality assessors. They refer to the work performed by these experts as 'parasitical new professions' (1999: 567). Whitchurch (2004) calls these new management or administrative roles 'hybrid roles'. In her study of the changing roles and identities of emerging professionals in higher education, Whitchurch (2007) makes reference to a number of findings by other researchers on how these are viewed. She cites Scott (1995: 64), who found that professional managers can be constructed as 'docile clerks' if they adopt a service mode, but if they contribute to decision- and policy-making, they may be perceived as being overly powerful. These contrasting views leave academic managers and administrators hanging in the balance and considered unpopular because there is nothing good that they seem to be doing: docile clerks or powerful despots. Based on her own research, Whitchurch (2004: 282) indicates similar insights, arguing that administrators have an 'identity crisis' and that the term 'administrator' has become devalued in the sense that, rather than conferring the ethos and values of public service, it now refers more often than not to routine clerical tasks. As someone who Whitchurch (2013), more benevolently, identifies as a 'third space professional', I identify with these observations. In my role as an educational development practitioner, I am constantly reminded that I remain an academic and deserve all benefits that academics enjoy, however, at the same time I am constantly reminded that my role is partly that of a support staff member (albeit not that of an administrator) and I should be available to students and staff at all times. My job description, though clear, does not have clear boundaries in terms of how much service I should give to colleagues who occupy 'pure' academic posts. This can result in my being overburdened with work but also in my experiencing a profound sense of discomfort regarding what I am required to do and how I am perceived and constructed by others.

The debates on quality assurance in higher education are a reflection of continuing policy and practice contestations across the globe. In their study of policy and practice

in formative assessment, Bailey and Garner (2010: 187) found that institutional policies and departmental practices do not yield the intended effect on students. Tinklin, Riddell and Wilson (2004) investigated the current state of policy and provision for disabled students in higher education in Scotland and England. They found that, even though there were signs of improvement, only the area of student support made efforts to provide individual support to disabled students. Both studies reflect the continuing tensions and contestations between policy and practice which impact widely on how quality assurance is evaluated.

Other critiques of quality assurance focus on the quantification of achievement which has resulted from processes and procedures associated with it. Nash (2013) identifies two different kinds of universities in the history of higher education: the 'patriarchal' university and the 'excellent' university. The patriarchal university dates back to ancient times, when one of the aims of higher education was to infuse 'civilisation' into society by educating the children of the elite. The contemporary 'excellent' university encourages massification of higher education, a positive move, whilst at the same time promoting the discourse of excellence which is dominant in the corporate world. In the new 'excellent' university, Nash argues that the concern is more with quantity than quality. The concern, for example, is with the number of publications a researcher has and not necessarily with the quality of the research work done. At a disciplinary level, Nash argues that academics are more interested in their own self-advancement than in contributing to the discipline, an observation which is somewhat at odds with Henkel's (2000) findings that academics derive their identity primarily from their disciplines and need to serve the discipline to do this.

While critiques of the introduction of quality assurance into higher education abound, not all perceive this development in an entirely negative fashion. This is particularly the case with regard to teaching and learning, where a plethora of work has been produced which draws on quality-related discourses in order to enhance the learning experiences available to ever increasing and diversifying groups of students. Biggs' (1999) book *Teaching for Quality Learning* has already been cited in this chapter. Other work

includes D'Andrea and Gosling's (2005) *Improving Teaching and Learning in Higher Education: A whole institution approach*. Moving on from an isolated focus on teaching, Morley (2003: 61) admits that, although quality audit is a 'huge sledgehammer meant to crack a small nut', if recommendations made were implemented, students would benefit tremendously. This would suggest that it is not quality assurance *per se* that is the problem but rather the way it is implemented, particularly at institutional level. This brings me back to the study reported in this thesis which attempts to examine the conditions enabling and constraining the implementation of quality assurance policies and procedures at a South African university.

Possibly one of the greatest problems associated with the introduction of quality assurance to higher education relates to the vast vocabulary associated with it. Terms such as 'quality assurance', 'quality promotion', 'quality management', 'quality audit', 'benchmarking' and 'accreditation' can bewilder even those predisposed to work towards quality in a university. Such terms create a sense of complexity in the higher education environment and ultimately make the environment complex to operate in. Arguably, one of the greatest problems associated with the introduction of quality assurance to higher education stems from academics' understanding of the purpose of the institution in which they work – the University. It is to this I now turn.

3.7 Quality assurance and the purposes of higher education

Badat (2010: 6) attempts to answer the fundamental question that was asked during the early years of the Industrial Revolution and recorded in the Yale Report of 1828 'What is the purpose of higher education?'. Badat identifies three purposes of higher education: the production of knowledge, the dissemination of knowledge and the undertaking of community engagement. He further describes a number of roles for higher education: i) the cultivation of highly educated people, ii) to further democracy and contribute to the development of a critical citizenry, iii) to engage with the development needs and challenges of society, iv) to engage with the intellectual and cultural life of societies and v) to undertake different kinds of scholarship. Badat's roles clearly take the university beyond its walls into the communities and wider society which exist beyond these. This

is far removed from the 'ivory tower' understandings which have historically captured much of what has gone on in universities over the centuries.

If a university has roles to play in society, it must engage with that society and, critically, make itself fit for the purpose of doing so. This brings us to the issue of accountability. Because a contemporary university is locked into a relationship with society, it needs to take account of that society.

Mabelebele (2013) takes this point further by arguing that:

. . . a university is the only institution in society where dissent is acknowledged and even celebrated, where difference of opinions is nurtured and rewarded, and in some cases even incentivised as an end in itself. It is a place where a Professor, irrespective of how many peer-reviewed articles he has published, is forced by tradition to explain the decision he or she makes.

From this, one can move on to seeing quality assurance as part of explaining decisions to society more generally.

I have already made reference to the plethora of terms which make quality-related work so confusing. I close this section by saying that, instead of talking quality assurance, quality audit, quality control, or quality enhancement, we need to think of academics becoming 'quality aware', a term which would emphasise, not their autonomy, but their responsibilities to society and the impact these have for what they do and what can be construed as 'quality'. This brings me to a discussion of the role of quality assurance in South African higher education.

3.8 Quality assurance in South African higher education

Before the first democratic election of 1994, South African higher education was divided along numerous lines. The first divide was according to race, with institutions of higher education established for the different social groups identified under the apartheid regime: African black, 'Coloured'⁵, Indian and White. The perceived needs of each of these social groups then determined the quality of higher education available to them,

⁵ Under apartheid, the term 'Coloured' was used for people of mixed descent.

with African blacks constructed as needing the most limited form. This ideology then impacted on the institutions established for each group in a myriad ways: on architecture, on resourcing, on curriculum, on the quality of academics employed to teach and on the possibilities for conducting research.

A second divide was between the university and 'technikons' or vocationally-oriented universities not dissimilar to the former polytechnics in the United Kingdom. Technikons offered a range of qualifications but focused mainly at the diploma level. Language also played a role in the classification of institutions. Thanks to apartheid ideology, Afrikaans had been developed as an academic language and institutions were divided according to the language used for learning and teaching.

The overlay of classifications according to social group, institutional type and language then impacted on location with institutions classified for African black social groups located in remote rural areas. This then further affected their ability to employ high-quality academics, to access utilities, and so on.

The arrival of democracy in 1994 meant that a fractured and unequal higher education system needed to be 'transformed' into one that would serve all citizens equally. The first major piece of policy following the shift to democracy, the 1997 White Paper on Higher Education (Ministry of Education, 1997), identified quality assurance as a tool in the transformation process.

Before 1994, South African higher education institutions did not have a formal overarching quality assurance body. The former technikons, however, had used a form of quality assurance conducted by the Certification Council for Technikon Education (SERTEC) (South African Council on Higher Education, 2004: 144). The challenges resulting from the need to introduce quality assurance to the higher education system were enormous because of its very nature. Some institutions of higher education, most notably those designated for African black social groups, had been consciously established to be inferior to others. As it became apparent that a shift towards democracy was inevitable, historically white institutions began to open their doors to students of all social groups. This posed a danger to the historically black institutions,

which were at risk unless the quality of the education they offered could be assured. In South Africa, therefore, quality assurance took on a particular political dimension not widely experienced elsewhere.

3.8.1 The Higher Education Quality Committee

The body responsible for quality assurance in South African higher education, the Higher Education Quality Committee, operates under the auspices of the Council on Higher Education. The Higher Education Act of 1997 (Act 101 of 1997) assigned responsibility for quality assurance to the Council on Higher Education. The Council on Higher Education responded by appointing a permanent subcommittee (the Higher Education Quality Committee) to discharge this function (South African Council on Higher Education, 2001).

The Higher Education Quality Committee is responsible for:

- promoting quality in higher education
- auditing the quality assurance mechanisms of institutions of higher education
- accrediting programmes of higher education and
- capacity development.

The Higher Education Quality Committee adopted a definition of quality for its work encompassing the following dimensions:

- fitness *of* purpose,
- fitness *for* purpose,
- value for money and
- individual and social transformation.

The 'fitness of purpose' dimension of this definition was important given the need for transformation in the higher education system. Since institutions had been established for very different purposes under apartheid and were being called upon to 'reinvent' themselves under a new political order, the purpose they identified for themselves was critically important. This applied as much to the historically white institutions as to the

historically black since the former, in particular, needed to make themselves relevant to a 'new' more inclusive society.

The CHE has worked in a number of areas since its establishment. Between 2005 and 2011 it completed its first round of institutional audits. The primary purpose of these audits was to:

. . . facilitate systematic and continuous quality development and improvement in higher education and to enhance institutional capacity to plan, act and report on quality related objectives and achievements. (South African Council on Higher Education, 2007: 4)

The South African Audit Framework requires the Council on Higher Education to make a series of commendations and recommendations to institutions following an audit. It is then for the institution to develop a quality improvement plan to ensure that recommendations are acted upon. The Higher Education Quality Committee has also conducted a number of national reviews of programmes leading to certain qualifications – for example, all programmes leading to teacher education qualifications and all leading to the degree of Master of Business Administration (MBA). The final area in which the Higher Education Quality Committee has worked has been with programme accreditation. Permission for all new programmes to be offered has to be sought by means of a rigorous submission and review process.

Transformation in South African higher education not only involved the establishment of an external quality assurance body but also led to institutional mergers where 36 public institutions (technikons and universities) were reduced to 21 (Ministry of Education, 2002). As a result of this process, three institutional types emerged: traditional universities, universities of technology and 'comprehensive' universities offering a mix of traditional and vocational programmes at both diploma and degree levels. Mergers were informed mostly by location since, in some cases, similar types of institution, but designated for different social groups, existed almost side by side⁶. The merger process

⁶ In Durban, Natal Technikon, intended for white social groups, and Technikon ML Sultan, intended for Indians, were separated only by a fence.

has been fraught with problems, however, particularly with regard to cultural differences, structural variances, a lack of required resources for the new restructured institution and competition for space and recognition in the newly formed institutions.

Badat (2008) provides an analysis of the dynamics, determinants and nature of institutional change in post-apartheid South Africa. Of particular interest to this study, given the framework outlined in Chapter Two, is Badat's identification of the impact that human agency has in effecting institutional change.

The first cycle of work by the Higher Education Quality Committee has drawn the attention of a number of researchers. Luckett (2006) challenges the validity of the audit methodology of the Higher Education Quality Committee, arguing that it focused on the mechanistic implementation of recommendations made by the panel. Luckett (*ibid.*) and Quinn and Boughey (2009) argue for the use of a depth methodology, such as that used in this study, both to inform quality assurance work and also to research it. Boughey and McKenna's (*in press*) analysis, using such a depth methodology, argues that, although the first cycle of quality assurance work has resulted in structural and agential elaboration in the sense that all institutions developed structures related to quality assurance and appointed key agents to manage it, what they term the 'domain of culture' has stagnated. This has resulted in inadequate explanations of the reasons for the system performing less well than it might have done in respect of teaching and learning.

The second cycle of quality work planned by the Higher Education Quality Committee moves away from a focus on quality assurance to quality enhancement with the Quality Enhancement Project. Gvaramadze (2008: 445) defines quality enhancement as a search for permanent improvement. According to a document jointly produced by the Council of Europe and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (2002), quality enhancement is the process of positively changing activities in order to provide for a continuous improvement in the quality of institutional provision. The Higher Education Quality Committee's Quality Enhancement Project

(South African Council on Higher Education, 2013) aims to improve student success both at the level of the individual and in the higher education sector as a whole. This is significant, given appalling student performance data produced by cohort studies such as those conducted by Scott, Yeld and Hendry (2007) and Letseka and Maile (2008). These studies show that black South Africans in particular bear the burden of poor performance. Of concern is that poor performance negates the gains made by increases in enrolments (South African Council on Higher Education, 2013d; Ministry of Higher Education and Training, 2013). The Quality Enhancement Project was officially launched in February 2014.

3.8.2 The role of other bodies in quality assurance in South Africa

The Council on Higher Education works with other organisations as well as with higher education institutions in relation to quality in South African higher education. The South African Qualifications Authority was established to administer the National Qualifications Framework. Once a programme has been approved by the Council on Higher Education following an accreditation process, the South African Qualifications Authority registers it on the National Qualifications Framework. Any qualification offered by an institution and not registered with the South African Qualifications Authority is not recognised. The South African Qualifications Authority not only works with the Council on Higher Education but with other quality assurance bodies responsible for other levels of education.

All accredited and registered programmes at public universities qualify for subsidy from the Department of Higher Education and Training provided the programme is in accord with the 'Programme and Qualification Mix' approved for it. The Programme and Qualification Mix is another mechanism which attempts to ensure that the institutions and programmes they offer are 'fit for purpose'. A rural university with a mission and vision statement identifying a focus on rural development would be unlikely to have programmes in nuclear physics approved as part of its PQM.

As well as working with the South African Qualifications Authority and the Department of Higher Education and Training, the Council on Higher Education also needs to work

with a number of other entities in the assurance of quality. The Council on Higher Education was designated a 'Quality Council for Higher Education and Training' by the National Qualifications Framework Act of 2008 (Republic of South Africa, 2008). As such, it exists alongside other Quality Councils such as Umalusi, the body responsible for quality in the general and further education and training bands of the National Qualifications Framework. From this perspective, the Council on Higher Education can be seen to have overall responsibility for quality in the higher education and training sector. However, other statutory bodies including professional boards and councils also have responsibility for the assurance of quality in relation to the areas for which they are responsible.

The relationship between these boards or councils and the Council on Higher Education has not always been easy. Suffice to say that universities with professional programmes would need to comply with both the requirements of the Higher Education Quality Committee and the professional boards. Such compliance would involve ensuring that the training programme met the standards of the council since most have developed standards for each professional area for which they are responsible. Professional councils have the right to 'accredit' universities as providers of training in the relevant area. Failure to gain this accreditation would result in graduates of a programme not being eligible to register with the relevant council and, thus, not being able to practice.

In practice, this means that professional programmes are subject to 'dual' quality assurance by both the Council on Higher Education and the relevant professional council. Both accredit programmes and both conduct reviews and audits. I will explore the way this is experienced at The University of Venda in Chapter Six of this thesis.

3.9 Quality assurance at The University of Venda

The University of Venda was established in the early 1980s as a branch of another historically black university. It celebrated 30 years of existence in 2012. The University of Venda survived the merger process of the early 2000s and retained its status as an individual university. Although the University aimed to achieve the title 'University of Technology' this was not granted and eventually the status of 'comprehensive' university was accepted.

Following the introduction of quality assurance to the South African system, an Institutional Planning and Quality Assurance Directorate was established. The establishment of this directorate, with a focus on the assurance of quality for all entities of the University, was then matched by the establishment of a teaching and learning centre, the Centre for Higher Education Teaching and Learning (CHETL), with a focus on quality promotion of teaching and learning in particular. Although these two entities are intended to complement each other, in practice conditions constrain the attainment of harmony.

The Directorate of Institutional Planning and Quality Assurance has limited power to work with quality assurance. The Directorate is currently headed by a director, three institutional planning officers, a secretary and a chief admin officer. In essence there is no single quality assurance specialist in the office. The institutional planning officers are comprised of a crop of young employees who were initially employed as administrators in the university. Should the office require to conduct a quality assurance review, the Director is compelled to source out expertise outside her directorate. Although quality assurance mechanisms are administered and managed by the directorate, academic autonomy means that recommendations and the need to fulfil requirements related to quality assurance need to be taken up by academics and departments. In practice, this means that appeals are often made to the Deputy Vice Chancellor to enforce implementation.

3.10 Conclusion

The critiques of quality assurance discussed earlier in this chapter are indicative of some of the difficulties associated with assuring quality in higher education. Academics have long been accustomed to large measures of autonomy, and the need to work with quality structures is often refuted at a philosophical level.

The problem statement of this study is that, despite the existence of mechanisms at national and institutional levels, the implementation of quality assurance policies at The University of Venda continues to be problematic. My aim in this study is to explore the conditions enabling and constraining implementation and so to be able to make a series

of recommendations which could be considered by the University. I now move to the study more directly by looking at the design of the research underpinning it.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH DESIGN

4.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the design of the piece of research underpinning the study reported in this thesis. As I have indicated in Chapter Two of this thesis, the study is based in critical realist philosophy, which acknowledges the existence of an ultimate reality independent of human thought and action as well as the relativity of human experience of and observations about that reality.

The design for a piece of research is the map that a researcher follows in order to complete an investigation. Following critical realist principles, the design for my study began with an acknowledgement that our knowledge of the world begins at the level of the Empirical – i.e. by knowing through the senses. Knowledge of deeper layers of reality is then produced through processes of abduction and retroduction. Retroduction, as described by Danermark et al. (2002: 96), is

. . . a mode of inference from observations to what must have been the case in order to bring about the observed events; it is about moving from one thing (empirical observation of events) and arriving at something different (what conditions and properties must exist for these events to be possible).

In more practical terms, retroduction involves asking the question, ‘What must the world really be like for these observations and experiences and experiences to have emerged?’ In the case of my study, this question becomes more specific and asks, ‘What must the world really be like for participants’ experiences of and observations about the need to implement quality assurance policies and procedures to emerge?’

Abduction, in contrast to retroduction, involves using theory to ‘see’ the world differently. In critical realist research, this theory is often termed ‘substantive’ theory. In my study, Archer’s social realism functions as a form of substantive theory, along with other theories about teaching and learning.

Given the basis of my study in critical realist philosophy, I therefore needed to design a piece of research which would begin by eliciting the experience and observations of participants in the study and which then moved from the relativity of these to the identification of the structures and mechanisms located at the level of the Real from which they emerged. In moving from the observations and experiences of participants, which I acknowledged as subjective, to this deeper level of reality, I then needed to manage my own fallibility and subjectivity. This Chapter explains the design decisions I took to manage this process and, thus, the rationale for my choice of study design.

4.2 The research design

4.2.1 Case study

The piece of research on which this thesis is based adopted a case study design.

As I have indicated above, critical realism is an under-labouring philosophy which aims to identify structures and mechanisms at the level of the Real that lead to the emergence of events at the level of the Actual and varying experiences of these events at the level of the Empirical (Bhaskar, 1979). The acknowledgement of these structures and mechanisms, which cannot be directly accessed through the senses, means that critical realism differs from other forms of realism, such as actualism, which acknowledge the existence of things but which deny the existence of underlying structures (Dobson, 1999).

According to Danermark et al. (2002: 74), a case study is particularly well suited to research based in critical realism because of its ability to allow us to identify mechanisms at the level of the Real which lead to emergence:

A law (e.g. the law of gravity) is a description of a mechanism existing as a property in reality, but whose observable effects strongly vary depending on concrete circumstances. Hence laws should be analysed as tendencies. What is usually called a qualitative case study in the literature is a method very well suited for acquiring knowledge about such mechanisms or laws.

Although they acknowledge the function of a case study in identifying underlying tendencies, Danermark and his team warn against over-generalisation, as in the positivist tradition. Bhaskar (1979, 1986) argues that society is an open system where events and experiences emerge as a result of the interplay of structures and mechanisms at the level of the Real. It is therefore not possible to make generalisations or predict results, as what occurs in one context might not occur in another. Of course there are tendencies that are found to be common in different contexts while others are more specific. In my study, as I will explain in more detail later, I used a series of case studies but then looked across them for more generalisable tendencies in order to answer my question about conditions enabling and constraining the implementation of quality assurance policies and procedures.

Merriam (1998: 9, in Henning, van Rensburg & Smit, 2004: 41), defines case studies as 'intensive descriptions and analyses of a single unit or bounded system ... such as an individual, a program, event, group, intervention or community'. A case study, then, is always bounded although it may have a particular focus (Miles and Huberman, 1984). Yin (1994: 13) defines a case study as:

... an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident.

Merriam (1988: 25, cited in Danermark et al., 2002: 158), notes that case studies can be particularistic, descriptive and heuristic. They can be particularistic because they focus on the 'particular', that is on a group, event, programme or phenomenon. By focusing on the particular, it is possible that a more general aspect of what is being examined may be identified. In addition, they can be descriptive because they aim to illustrate the complexities of a situation on the basis that no single factor is dominant in any phenomenon. Finally, they can be heuristic because they can attempt to explain the reasons for something.

Yin (2003) distinguishes between explanatory and exploratory case studies. Explanatory studies aim to explain assumed causal links in real-life situations that are too complex for other research methods such as a survey or an experimental design. Exploratory case studies, as their name suggests, aim to explore a phenomenon which has no clear parameters or outcomes. In addition to these two types identified by Yin (ibid.), Stake (1995) identifies 'intrinsic' studies, where the researcher undertakes the study because he/she has a genuine interest in the case and wants to understand what is going on in particular circumstances. According to Stake (1995: 237), an intrinsic case study is:

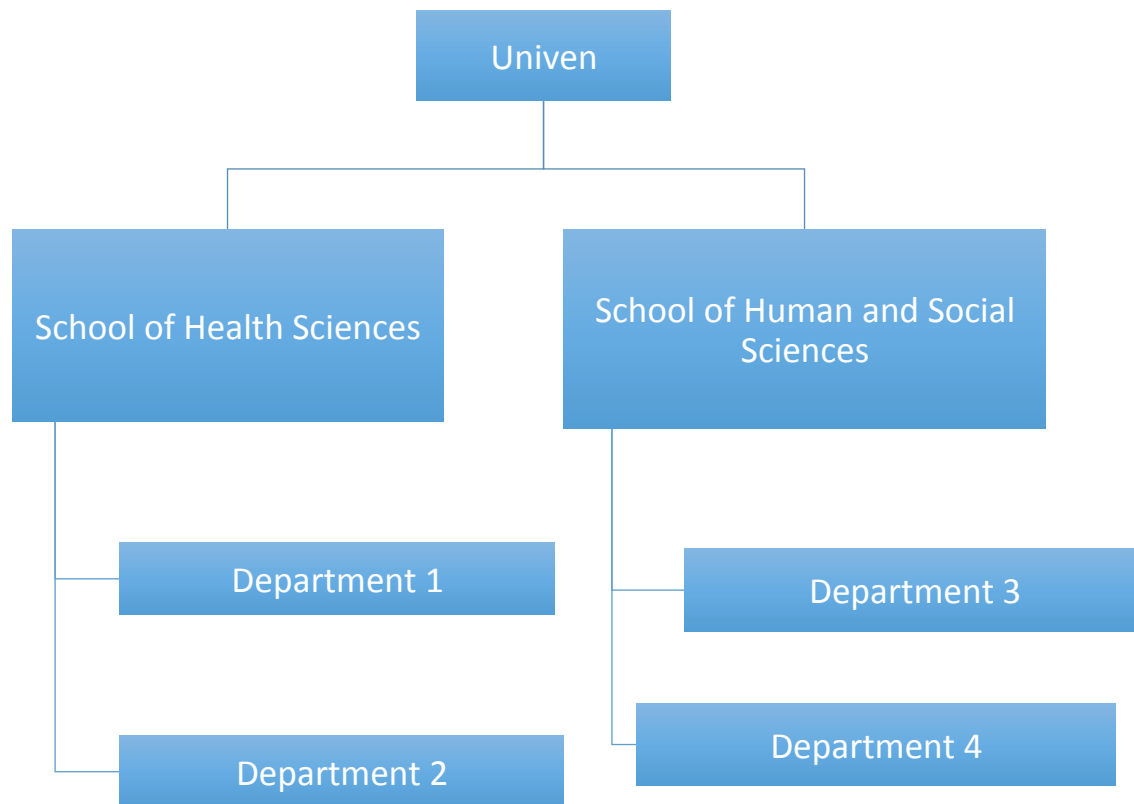
. . . not undertaken primarily because the case represents other cases or because it illustrates a particular trait or problem, but because in all its particularity and ordinariness, [the] case itself is of interest.

Dobson (1999: 259) further identifies the 'instrumental' case study that attempts to provide insight into an issue or refinement of a theory (Dobson 1999: 259). Finally, Yin (ibid.) identifies 'multiple' case studies where the researcher aims to discover differences within and between cases.

As with many typologies, I do not find the distinctions noted above particularly useful. The cases described in this thesis are explanatory, in that I aim to identify tendencies in the interplay of structures and mechanisms at the level of the Real which lead to the implementation or non-implementation of policies and procedures related to the quality assurance of teaching and learning. However, they are also exploratory, since I do not claim definitive links between the tendencies and the experiences and observations of participants since (and I will refer to this later) critical realism requires me to acknowledge my own fallibility in identifying those tendencies. The cases are also intrinsic, as I have a particular interest in The University of Venda as I explained in my opening comments in Chapter One. I do, however, use multiple cases, as I will explain below.

4.2.2 The University of Venda as the case study

As I have indicated earlier in this thesis, the University of Venda serves as a case for this study. However, to examine the way various stakeholders exercise agency, I needed to work with a number of 'sub-cases'. I therefore worked with two departments in the School of Human and Social Sciences and two more departments in the School of Health Sciences as 'sub-cases'. My design therefore involved an overarching case (The University of Venda) with two sub-cases (the two schools) and two more sub-cases within each school. The following diagram aims to depict this.



This gave me a design of four cases within the two overarching cases of the schools and the single overarching case of the university. The two schools were purposively selected because of the differences between them. The School of Human and Social Sciences is a provider of more 'traditional', discipline-based programmes while the School of Health Sciences provides vocational training as well as more traditional

training. Significantly, the School of Health Sciences is involved with professional bodies who exert their own powers in relation to quality assurance.

4.3 The unit of analysis and participants

As Carter and New (2004: 33) point out, the choice of unit(s) of analysis is not a 'neutral' or a 'natural' one. I have already indicated my reasons for choosing the two schools. The selection of participants in this study was also not by default as they had to belong to one of the participating schools and also be academics. Participants in this study were lecturers, heads of departments and deans of the two schools. I chose participants at different levels of the academic hierarchy because of Archer's (1995, 2000) work on agency, discussed in Chapter Two. My thinking was that some of the lecturers I interviewed would be primary agents, individuals simply sharing the same life chances at The University of Venda. Others might have developed corporate agency (for example at departmental level) in deciding on a project (which could, for example, involve having implemented the institutional Assessment Policy and having then 'engaged in concerted action to re-shape or retain the structural or cultural feature in question' (Archer, 1995: 258), where the structural feature would be the assessment of student learning, since assessment can be used both to maintain and to challenge existing social structures. Yet others would have exercised their agency to become social actors. Such individuals would be deans or heads of departments who were able to draw on the structural emergent powers and properties of the role they occupied as well as their own personal emergent powers and properties.

The School of Health Sciences is comprised of four departments: Advanced Nursing Science, Nutrition, Kinetics and Psychology. The teaching approach throughout the School focuses on problem-based learning (PBL) in the degree programmes and a more traditional approach for those in the diploma programmes. The School of Human and Social Sciences adopts a more traditional approach to teaching, with no single department practicing PBL. It has eight departments, namely, Social Work, Communication and Applied Language Studies, Development Studies, the four African language departments (Sesotho, Xitsonga, Tshivenda and Seswati) housed in a centre named the Mathivha Centre for African languages, and an Institute for Gender and

Youth Studies. The School of Human and Social Sciences boasts the largest enrolment figures across the university.

4.4 Sampling

In preparing for the interviews I randomly selected two departments from each of the two schools (Humanities and Health) and then I further randomly selected one to two lecturers from each one of the participating departments. It was also important to interview at least all heads of departments in order to gather information from departmental management. It is worth mentioning that, in my initial selection of departments, I selected the Department of Nutrition; however, I learned that the department had no head of department at the time of the interviews. It only had a caretaker, even though there were senior members who qualified to serve as heads of department. I further interviewed the two deans of the participating schools.

School of Health Sciences

Participants' designation	School/Department
1. Lecturer 1	Department 1
2. Lecturer 2	Department 1
3. Lecturer 3 (HoD)	Department 1
4. Lecturer 4	Department 2
5. Lecturer 5	Department 2
6. Lecturer 6 (HoD)	Department 2
7. Dean	School of Health Sciences

School of Human and Social Sciences

Participants' designation	School/Department
1. Lecturer 7	Department 3
2. Lecturer 8	Department 3
3. Lecturer 9 (HoD)	Department 3
4. Lecturer 10	Department 4
5. Lecturer 11	Department 4

6. Lecturer 12 (HoD)	Department 4
7. Dean	School of Human and Social Sciences

4.5 Data collection

As I have indicated previously, the theoretical lens of this study acknowledges both an ultimate reality and the relativity of human experience and observations. The collection of data within this critical realist framework required me to work from the level of human experience and observations (the level of the Empirical) to the level of the Real. In order to explore the level of the Empirical, I used semi structured interviews (see 4.5.1 below). In addition, I analysed selected documents such as policies, external examiners' reports, committee reports, minutes of departmental meetings and so on.

4.5.1 Interviews

I collected data through face-to-face interviews with deans of the selected schools, heads of departments of these schools and lecturers who were responsible for teaching individual modules. The focus on interviews was crucial in this study because of critical realism's emphasis on the subjective nature of knowledge and the focus on the presence of underlying deep mechanisms and enduring structures within the social world. As a researcher, I needed to acknowledge my own subjectivity as an interviewer and my own fallibility in the conclusions I came to as a result of conducting them. In conducting the interviews, I tried to abide by Somekh and Lewin's advice (2005) that researchers should engage in on-going self scrutiny to avoid bias.

In order to set a credible standard for the interview process, I conducted a pilot interview with one lecturer from the School of Health Sciences and another one from the School of Human and Social Sciences. Each interview took not less than 45 minutes. As a result of these pilots, I came to understand the hard work involved in interviewing if it was to be done to exacting standards. I therefore decided to conduct not more than two interviews per week.

Each interview was recorded and then transcribed. The demands of my job meant that I did not have the time to do the transcribing for myself. I therefore employed a professional transcriber for this task. I did, however, take enormous care to check

transcriptions against recordings by listening to the tapes and reading the accompanying transcription.

Each participant gave permission for the interview to be recorded and transcribed. They were also invited to check transcriptions before I used them as data.

4.5.2 Documents and reports

The quality assurance documents of the University served as data for the study. These included policies on teaching and learning, minutes of Teaching and Learning Committee meetings, the Higher Education Quality Committee's Report on its audit of The University of Venda, the institutional Quality Improvement Plan, submitted as part of institutional audit processes and an Internal Audit Report by PricewaterhouseCoopers. This Internal Audit Report was commissioned by the University because of concerns about quality and standards.

4.6 Data analysis

This study is about seeking causal mechanisms that impact on the implementation of quality assurance policies at The University of Venda. According to Maxwell (2004), qualitative research methods can be used to identify causal relationships and to develop causal explanation.

As I indicated in Chapter Two, Archer's (1995) morphogenetic framework allows a researcher to examine change, or non-change over time. T_1 is the conditioning phase of the framework since Archer acknowledges that all human action and thought is framed by the worlds into which we are born. The framework then requires an analysis of interaction between agents and the socio-cultural contexts in which they find themselves between T_2 and T_3 . In this study, my analysis of T_2 to T_3 mainly involved the use of critical discourse analysis as proposed by Fairclough (1989).

Critical discourse analysis is a theory of inquiry, which emerged out of the field of Critical Linguistics in the 1970s. Fairclough argues three points about language: firstly, that language is a form of social practice, implying that it is not isolated to society but it forms part of society; secondly, that language is a social process; and, finally, that the use of language is socially conditioned (1989: 22). He therefore proposes a model for

interpreting discourse as production and interpretation. This he illustrates in the following diagram:

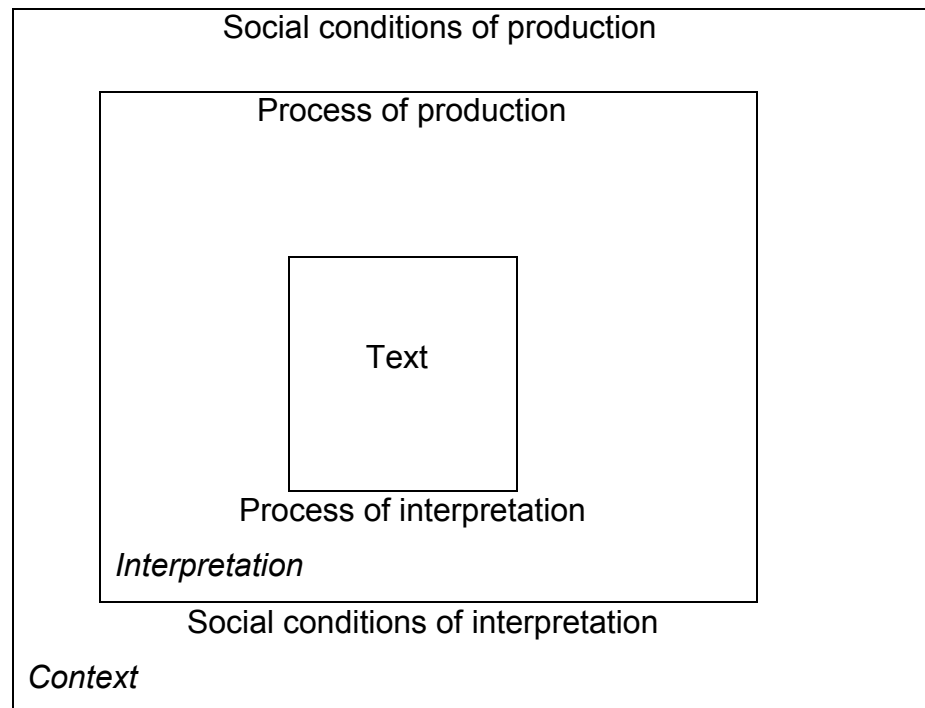


Figure 2: *Discourse as text, interaction and context (Fairclough 1989: 25)*

The purpose of critical discourse analysis is to analyse 'opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language' (Wodak, 1995: 204, cited in Blommaert and Bulcaen, 2000: 448).

Kress (1989: 7) defines discourses as:

. . . systematically organised sets of statements which give expression to the meanings and values of an institution. Beyond that, they define, describe and delimit what it is possible to say and not possible to say (and by extension – what it is possible to do or not to do) with respect to the area of concern of that institution, whether marginally or centrally.

In critical realist terms, discourses are mechanisms at the level of the Real (Fairclough, Jessop & Sayer, 2001). My understanding is that, as mechanisms at the level of the

Real discourses function, as Kress (*ibid.*) notes, to 'define, describe and delimit what it is possible to say and not possible to say (and by extension – what is possible to do or not to do', they lead to the emergence of events at the level of the Actual and experiences at the level of the Empirical.

I understand structures to exist at a number of levels. In my analysis, I will look for the interplay of 'macro' structures such as social class, gender, race, geography, and finance as well as of 'lower level' organisational structures such as committees, policies, departments and so on.

My analysis of the data involved repeated reading of the transcriptions of interviews and the institutional documents identified in 4.5.2 above. In reading, I looked for words and phrases that could indicate the sets of ideas, which could then be 'clumped' together to form a discourse. I began with a tentative identification of each discourse and then sought to firm up this identification through repeated readings of the text and by looking across texts for dominant discourses. So, for example, I came to identify a 'quality as numbers' discourse, a set of ideas focusing on graduation, throughput and success rates and constructing quality as meeting national norms. Indicators of the 'quality as numbers' discourse were the use of the terms 'success', 'graduation' and 'throughput' rates alongside others such as 'improve'. My use of critical discourse analysis was not 'linguistic' in the sense that I attempted a deep linguistic analysis. Rather, it was more 'social' in that I used lexis as an indicator of ideas circulating in social processes. Once I had identified a discourse, my aim was to 'deconstruct' it, that is, to use theory to problematise the way it was being used in relation to quality and quality assurance.

My analysis of structure proceeded on the basis of my knowledge of the higher education context and of the University of Venda context in particular. As I explain in Chapter Two, I understood the term 'structure' to indicate a mechanism which mediates the allocation of resources. Thus, gender as a structure mediates who gets access to what. Social class as a structure serves the same purpose. I took structures to include funding, the student body, facilities, and geographical location, as well as committees and policies.

4.7 Validity checks

Any piece of research requires validity checks. Research located in critical realist philosophy is no different. As I have indicated, I worked from the level of the Empirical in order to identify conditions at the level of the Real using the processes of abduction and retroduction. As a result, I was involved in the construction of knowledge and needed to be aware of my own fallibility at all times.

Researchers such as have little or no confidence in the validity and reliability of qualitative research but there are those who vindicate its credibility. Bapir (2012: 11) provides a convincing account of the credibility of qualitative research. In his discussion he argues that research involves a dialectical interaction between the researcher and the social world through question and answer (2012: 16). My attempts to limit my own fallibility involved a constant process of questioning and answering and then questioning my answers.

Any piece of research which follows critical and social realist principles is even more sensitive to the need for reliability and validity since the main concern is not an investigation of the empirical world but rather the ontology of a social phenomenon. In this study, I used Silverman's (2006) validation method, namely triangulation and respondent validation. Triangulation is the art of comparing different kinds of data quantitatively or qualitatively and using different kinds of methods. Data triangulation has been commended by seasoned researchers because of its ability to confirm validity and reliability of results (Kempster and Parry, 2011; Rowland and Parry, 2009). I thus compared interview transcripts, minutes of committee meetings and other documents. I then took my initial findings back to respondents for validation.

4.8 Ethical clearance

I sought ethical clearance through the institutional Research Office, which is under the leadership of the Deputy Vice Chancellor Academic. I wrote to the Director of Research and Innovation at the University asking to be granted permission to conduct interviews and to access confidential documents of the University for purposes of analysis.

I exercised transparency in relation to this study at all times. All participants who took part in the interview process read the permission letter given by the Research Office prior to an interview. Providing participants with the letter was intended to ensure that they understood the purposes of the research and their own roles in it. I approached participants telephonically to ask for appointments with them. It was at this stage that I clearly explained the purpose of the interviews. The reason for disclosing at this point was to ensure that the prospective participant was aware of what I was doing and what I expected of them before inviting me to their office. I ensured that they decided from the outset whether they were interested in participating in the research process or not. At any point of the research, participants had the choice to terminate their involvement in the process if they so wished. They were also guaranteed as much anonymity as possible and were made cognisant of the fact that, in a small institution, anonymity is not always completely possible.

Documents used for analysis were minutes, teaching and learning policies and Higher Education Quality Committee's reports, as well as the Internal Audit Report for teaching and learning. At the time of the study, all these documents were 'public' in that they were already in the hands of academics. However, I made a special request to the Office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor, Academic for permission to access and use the documents for the purposes of this study. Nonetheless, I was at an advantage with regard to accessing minutes for the Senate Teaching and Learning Committee since I was the official editor of documents related to the Centre for Higher Education Teaching and Learning at the time of doing this research. Even though I was granted permission from the Research Office to access university documents, with regard to departmental and school documents (minutes, external examiners' reports and so on), I had to ask permission from heads of departments and deans to access them.

On completion of this study, research documents will be kept in a safe environment according to the University of Venda's rules and regulations until such time that they can be destroyed. Electronic copies of the documents will be password protected.

4.9. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have sought to explicate the design decisions I made in conducting this research. I now move to a discussion of the research itself. I do this by beginning with my analysis of T_1 , the social and cultural conditioning in place at The University of Venda as quality assurance was introduced.

CHAPTER FIVE: STRUCTURAL AND CULTURAL AT T₁

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter I provide an analysis of the enabling and constraining conditions in the domains of structure, culture and agency which contribute to the emergence of quality-related practices and experiences at T₁ at the University of Venda. T₁ for this study is the period of policy development in the South African higher education context, which concided with the end of apartheid and the beginning of a new democracy and continued through to the start of the first cycle of quality assurance work in South Africa in the early 2000s. The Council on Higher Education (South African Council on Higher Education, 2004: 230–234) describes three periods of education policy development in South Africa: the symbolic-policy making period, the framework development period and the implementation period. T₁ spans all three of these periods. Cloete (2002: 87–88) describes the period 1994 to 1999 as a period of policy development and 1999 as the start of the implementation period. As I have indicated in Chapter Three of this thesis, the White Paper on Higher Education (Ministry of Education, 1997) identified quality assurance as a ‘lever’ for the transformation of the South African higher education system. The Higher Education Quality Committee, the standing committee responsible for quality assurance under the auspices of the South African Council on Higher Education, was then founded in 2000 and formally began its first cycle of quality work soon after. It is for this reason that I take T₁ as ending in the early 2000s and not in 1999 following Cloete (2000).

It is in this Chapter, therefore, that I discuss the conditioning of agents. My discussion affirms the involuntaristic placement of agents in South African higher education with specific reference to The University of Venda. The understanding is that this conditioning impacts on the experiences and observations made in the interview data and also in the documents analysed for the purposes of this study.

As already mentioned in Chapter Two of this thesis, Archer’s (1995) morphogenetic framework assumes the separation of culture, structure and agency for the purposes of

analysis. This Chapter follows from this by analysing structure and culture separately in the period T1. From this analysis, the conditioning of the agents I interviewed and who were involved in the development of policy and other documents analysed in my study will become apparent.

5.2 The Structural system

As Archer (1995) argues, more often than not it is the structural system that changes more quickly than the cultural system. This claim is confirmed by Boughey's (2009, 2010) and Boughey and McKenna's (2011a, 2011b) analysis of teaching and learning in South African higher education. Their study was based on a number of case studies, one of which was The University of Venda. Their analysis is that The University of Venda has seen a substantial number of new structures since the beginning of the implementation period of higher education transformation although changes in the domain of culture are much less prevalent. One such structure is the quality assurance system. Other new structures relate to the management of teaching and learning and include the establishment of a Teaching and Learning Centre, the Centre for Higher Education Teaching and Learning. As I have indicated, however, my analysis of T1 looks at other structures with a much longer history.

5.2.1 Apartheid

Bunting (2002a) notes that the apartheid government under the leadership of the National Party enforced laws intended to restrain the growth of a critical citizenry within black social groups. Clearly, higher education had a significant role to play in relation to this goal. Given the status of The University of Venda as a historically black university established under apartheid as an institution of higher education in the independent 'homeland' of Venda, it is not surprising that apartheid should play an important conditioning role to this day.

Under apartheid, the National Party government established two types of higher education institutions: universities and technikons. Universities were strictly intended for the production of scientific knowledge and technikons were meant for the promotion of technology. Qualification structures at each type of institution furthered this divide.

Policy explained what 'science' meant and what 'technology' meant, although it is arguable that 'science' at the historically black universities differed from understandings of this same endeavour at historically white institutions.

Above and beyond this fundamental division between university and technikon, the apartheid state followed the most obvious act of separating institutions along lines of race. Institutions were established to cater for Black African social groups only, Whites only, Indians only and, finally, 'Coloureds'⁷ only. Should an institution wish to admit a student of a different race, permission had to be sought from the government. All this became the case because government maintained that public higher education institutions were 'creatures of the state' (Bunting, 2002a). In other words, government enjoyed full control of institutions of higher learning, influencing how they evolved, what and who they could teach and what they could research.

Yet one further obvious division in the apartheid higher education system involved language, with institutions divided in relation to whether English or Afrikaans served as a language of learning and teaching.

Governance and funding of the apartheid higher education structure involved a number of separate entities. Within the Republic of South Africa the House of Assembly administered institutions intended for White social groups, the House of Representatives those intended for 'Coloured' social groups, the House of Delegates those intended for Indian social groups and the Department of Education and Training those intended for black African groups. Each of the 'independent' republics of Transkei, Bophuthatswana, Ciskei and Venda (the so called 'TBCV states') then administered higher education institutions within their own borders.

The six Afrikaans-speaking white universities largely accepted the apartheid government's ideology of the university being a 'creature of the state'. Jansen (cited in Bunting, 2002a) observes that these institutions lacked what he calls a 'critical

⁷ In apartheid discourse, the term 'Coloured' was used to refer to individuals of mixed race.

discourse', both in relation to the disciplines as well as towards society more generally. The four English-speaking white universities opposed the ideas of apartheid and refused to succumb to apartheid laws and ideologies although Mamdani (1998) argues that these universities tended to form an island of white social privilege rather than working to bring about social and political change in the country.

Historically black institutions, both in the Republic of South Africa and the so-called 'homelands', were established mainly to produce the civil servants and teachers required for the ideology of 'separation' to function. Governance was authoritarian with the National Party making every effort to ensure that councils and management structures supported apartheid ideology. This was done, in the early years at least, through the appointment of individuals who had been trained at one of the six Afrikaans-speaking universities (Bunting, 2000a). In later years, black vice chancellors were appointed although control was exercised by the continuance of appointments friendly to the apartheid regime at council level. Academic structures also tended to be dominated by Afrikaners, especially at head of department level.

As Bunting (ibid.) also points out, the intellectual life of these institutions was also steered by Afrikaner interests. According to Bunting, the Afrikaans-speaking universities tended to be influenced heavily by instrumentalist notions of knowledge. The appointment of staff members who had been trained at Afrikaans-speaking universities, therefore, ensured that the historically black institutions functioned with a strict training focus. Few were interested in introducing postgraduate programmes or in pursuing research, and the intellectual life of these institutions was impoverished as a result. The focus of curricula was on the reproduction of knowledge deemed appropriate for black social groups. Although there was dissent towards this at some historically black institutions, the power of the apartheid state was hard to resist.

In this sort of context, agents were not able to exercise interpretative freedom because they had limited or no power at all to make informed choices about their preferred interests. Although apartheid functioned as a structure, it is in the cultural domain, I would argue, that its effects are most heavily experienced. Although the historically

black institutions became sites of struggle against apartheid as the 1980s wore on, the tight control, lack of intellectual freedom and instrumentalist notions of the function of a university arguably continue to exercise influence to this day.

Since the sizing and shaping exercise which formed the National Plan for Higher Education (Ministry of Education, 2002) historically black universities have had to exist in a system in assumed equality. The advantages provided by apartheid to some institutions at the expense of others mean that this assumed equality is far from a reality, however. As I will show throughout the rest of this Chapter, at T1 apartheid played a dominant role in structuring the conditions in which academics at The University of Venda were expected to work with quality assurance.

5.2.2 Funding

The state funding formula for higher education in the 1980s and early 1990s also contributed to the creation of disparities in higher education institutions, which have continued to have a negative impact in the post-apartheid era. Bunting (2002b) identifies two funding structures in the 'separate but equal' apartheid era: the funding formula and the system of 'negotiated' budgets. Under apartheid, initially only the historically white universities were funded according to a standardised funding formula. The application of a funding formula meant that these institutions were allowed considerable financial freedom to plan and manage their own affairs since they could anticipate the amount of funding which they would receive in advance and manage their affairs accordingly. Significantly, they were able to build reserves and plan for the development and maintenance of infrastructure.

Unlike the historically white institutions, historically black universities and technikons were funded using a system of 'negotiated' budgets which, in practice, meant increasing by an agreed percentage the amount of funding allocated for the previous year (Bunting, 2002b). This system had a number of consequences, most notably in terms of developing capacity for financial planning and management. All appointments, for example, had to be agreed with the funding body, so the institution was unable to exercise control over employment ratios and so on. The 'negotiated' budget system also

meant that institutions were required to return any unspent funding to the relevant government department at the end of a financial year. This then resulted in the practice of spending heavily at the year's end to ensure that available funding was used regardless of the purpose. The requirement to return unspent funds then meant that an institution could not build reserves or plan and save for large projects. The fact that the historically black universities did not work with a funding formula based on enrolments also meant that the capacity to deal with enrolment planning was never built alongside experience of planning for the use of tuition fees. The fact that the majority of students in these institutions were from impoverished households also meant that fees were a problem, particularly when dependence on them became important in the wake of the application of the funding formula to all institutions.

In 1988, the use of the funding formula was extended to historically black institutions within the Republic of South Africa. The formula was then applied to institutions in the former 'homelands' (i.e. the TBVC states) once they were 're-incorporated' into the Republic following democracy. Initially, historically black institutions were glad that the use of the funding formula had been extended to them (Bunting, *ibid.*). As time wore on, however, the legacy of apartheid meant that this became a constraining rather than an enabling structure, as many institutions were unable to exercise the financial management to work with the formula and as the incentive-based formula did not favour the conditions in which they found themselves in any case. The situation with regard to funding was then exacerbated by the failure of the redress funding, long expected by historically black institutions, to materialise.

As a result, the impact of the history of funding on The University of Venda is evident to this day, as the following extract from an interview with a member of staff, who points to the impact of infrastructure on daily functioning, demonstrates.

[Infrastructure] impacts very badly. Like firstly, from what I was saying, the cohesion of the Department would also be assisted by us being together in one place, but we find somebody else is there, somebody else is there, somebody

else is there; throughout this University. So there's no way that we can be having this constant fellowship together, you know, which I think will be building the relationships. We rarely see each other, so we are not really working together. That's one part of it. The second part of it is, we, like I was saying that I was running some practicals, we don't have lab to run the practicals that I'm running. We have to be negotiating every year. We have to be going and negotiating from the other Department. And furthermore there's this thing of the admission, the number, the quota has never been given. I feel that those quotas they don't check whether you would be able to handle the number that's imposed, you are just given this number and every year

The structural conditioning of apartheid funding therefore plays an important part of my analysis of T_1 .

5.2.3 The geographical location of The University of Venda

The physical positioning of The University of Venda cannot be viewed as innocent. As indicated above, the University's location in the former 'homeland' of Venda was part of its construction as a particular kind of institution with a particular purpose. The 'homeland' of Venda lay on the border between South Africa and Zimbabwe in the far north east of the Republic. Its 'capital', Thohoyandou, was approximately 180 kilometres away from the nearest large settlement, in what was known as Pietersburg (now Polokwane). This remote location has had obvious implications for the University, one of the first of which, as indicated earlier in this study, relates to the challenge of recruiting high calibre academics, a difficulty noted in the Higher Education Quality Committee's Audit Report on the institution (South African Council on Higher Education, 2011: 39–40):

The [Self Evaluation Report] SER as well as interviews with different individuals and structures at the University clearly indicate that recruiting suitably qualified and experienced staff constitutes a major problem. The rural character of the University and its concomitant problems such as a lack of choice of schools, inadequate staff housing and lack of comparable amenities constitute obstacles to attracting appropriately qualified staff.

To a certain extent, this situation has been alleviated through the recruitment of highly-qualified academics from other African countries (The University of Venda Website, VC's address), arguably a result of improved negotiating strengths between the University's management and the most sought-after qualified academics. Archer (1995) describes negotiating strength as a second-order relationship between agential groupings, where one group commands resources which are highly valued but lacking in group X yet it can be offered by group Y who in turn possess resources that group X is desperately in need of. In short, this is about exchange of skills and resources by two critical parties. Given the situation in higher education in much of Africa, The University of Venda arguably commands resources valued by qualified academics from other countries even though, in relation to other South African institutions, they may seem diminished. While the recruitment of academics from other African countries allows The University of Venda to maintain a higher level of functioning than might otherwise be possible, it is nonetheless not without problems. Xenophobia has been noted at many South African campuses and distinctions between expatriate educators and native South Africans can be discerned at The University of Venda.

Challenges stemming from the University's geographical location not only relate to the recruitment of qualified academics but also of students. Students that are attracted to The University of Venda are mostly local and those from poor school backgrounds. Nonetheless, a number of students come from other provinces such as Gauteng and Mpumalanga. A discourse of 'the weak student' is identified in the Higher Education Quality Committee's Audit Report (ibid. 2011: 17).

According to the University, a large number of students who enroll come from a weak schooling background and require extra support to succeed in their studies. Over the years the University has enrolled many more students than its carrying capacity with the result that it has not only put the physical infrastructure of the Institution under enormous strain, but has also overstretched its provision of educational resources.

This discourse allocates blame for poor performance to students and cites the need for extra support rather than considering the way the institution itself could be 'transformed'

to deal with a particular kind of student body, a concept which has long characterised work in the South African Academic Development movement (see Boughey, 2012). This would have particular implications for what would be considered 'quality' in teaching and learning, where quality is defined as being 'fit for purpose'.

The comment in the Higher Education Quality Committee's Audit Report also relates to the failure on the part of The University of Venda to plan and manage admissions, which can be attributed, as section 5.2.2 above notes, to the structural conditioning related to funding during apartheid. It would appear, therefore, that the interplay of apartheid, location and funding results in the emergence of particular kinds of events, in this case the over-enrolment of particularly weak students. The discourse of blame, identified above, then exacerbates this position as it shifts responsibility to the students when, arguably, the University itself should be restructuring so that it becomes fit for the purpose of addressing their needs.

The geographical location of the institution has one more conditioning effect in its capacity to isolate academics and others from ideas and events occurring elsewhere in both the national higher education system and globally. This isolation is disciplinary and relates to developments within higher education itself. As quality assurance was introduced to the South African system from 2000 onwards, many national and regional events were organised to share information and experiences. These events mostly took place in large urban centres. The ability of academics and managers at The University of Venda to travel to these events was impacted by the University's location in the north east of the country. In a similar vein, their ability to interact in person with others involved in implementing quality assurance compared negatively in comparison to those working in large urban centres housing two or more universities. This geographical isolation can therefore be seen to have a particular structuring effect as quality assurance and other innovations associated with the 'reinvention' of the South African education system took place in the period of policy implementation from 1999 onwards.

5.2.4 Management

Given the background described above, it is inevitable that The University of Venda management was conditioned and that this conditioning continues to structure the

institution. As my analysis of interviews with academics will show, in the early 2000s it appears as though the introduction of quality assurance at The University of Venda came as a surprise to many academics. However, at the structural level, management facilitated all that was expected of them by the Higher Education Quality Committee and their funders, the then Department of Education. Given the history of compliance shaped by apartheid conditioning, the institutional management's adoption of systems introduced by the Higher Education Quality Committee is understandable. Elsewhere in South Africa, and particularly at the historically white liberal universities, resistance to change was evident both on the part of academics themselves and of institutional managers (see McKenna and Boughey, 2014). This resistance was not only to quality assurance but also to other innovations such as, for example, the concept of the 'unit standard' introduced by the South African Qualifications Authority as a means of standard setting in the mid 1990s. That higher education did not adopt the unit standard and agreed rather to register 'whole qualifications' on the National Qualifications Framework, can be seen as a result of this resistance. While a compliant management structure at The University of Venda might have resulted in the adoption of quality assurance, this was by no means the case for academics, as my analysis in the next chapter of this thesis will show.

The introduction of quality assurance to the South African system in 2001 (South African Council on Higher Education, 2001) resulted in new structures being established at The University of Venda. These included a quality assurance office, which was tied to the institutional and planning office. However, development of institutional policy related to the assurance of quality in teaching and learning did not immediately follow. Arguably this was due to internal political instability at a time when academics showed dissatisfaction with the then top management, dissatisfaction which led to the non-renewal of the Vice Chancellor's employment contract. The instability, most evident between 2005 and 2008, resulted in the appointment of an interim management team. As a result, the focus shifted to sorting out management issues with the risk of giving insufficient attention to the University's 'core' business. This also resulted in a number of academics making the decision to leave the University, with consequences for the academic project.

The year 2007 saw the establishment of the Directorate of Institutional Planning and Quality Assurance (IPQA) at The University of Venda. This unit comprises three sections, a planning section, a quality assurance section and an information management section. It was only around 2009, after the appointment of the current principal and vice-chancellor, that teaching and learning policies were developed followed by a mega-plan for infrastructure development, which is being completed in phases. By 2009, the Higher Education Quality Committee's first institutional audit of the University (due in the second half of 2010) was looming and the development of policy related to teaching and learning was imperative. In an interview, one of the deans noted that teaching and learning policies were only developed in order to satisfy the requirements of the institutional audit, suggesting that, had it not taken place, they would not have been written. Policies for Teaching and Learning, Assessment and the Monitoring of Teaching and Learning were developed at this time by a newly appointed Head of Quality. These policies were reviewed in 2013 and more were developed and adopted during that year.

The hurried development of the original batch of teaching and learning policies in 2009 was arguably one reason for the exclusion of academics from the process. However, the authoritarian management structures inherited from apartheid can be seen to have contributed to this process. Institutional management structures had long been accustomed to making decisions without consulting with academics and this conditioning allowed policies to be developed in this fashion once again. Arguably it is the case that this lack of consultation left academics in ignorance not only of policy but also of quality assurance, its rationale and its procedures in general. As my analysis of $T_2 - T_3$ will show, this was to have consequences for the involvement of academics in implementation.

Arguably the introduction of discourses related to quality assurance and higher education transformation in general could have been expected to trigger the establishment of material interest groups aimed at advancing these discourses at The University of Venda. This does not seem to have happened, however, as the task of developing the initial teaching and learning policies rested on an individual who only had

a team of people to provide administrative assistance. Academics were not involved in the process. Crucial here is Archer's (1995: 315) point that:

1. Structural differentiation is intrinsic to the development of SEPs
2. Ideational diversification is intrinsic to the development of CEPs
3. Social re-grouping is intrinsic to the development of PEPs.

It is evident that, at The University of Venda, although there was noticeable structural differentiation, which led to the development of SEPs, there was little, if any, ideational diversification that could have led to the development of CEPs, as well as lack of social re-grouping which could have led to the development of PEPs. Hence culturally and agentially there was a lag in the 'transformation' agenda at The University of Venda.

The events described above can be seen to be related to the structural conditioning of apartheid. Management complied with what were perceived to be 'instructions' from the Higher Education Quality Committee. Instability in the management structure, a feature of many historically black universities since the shift to democracy, as new roles are taken on, then leads to a failure to build quality assurance in the institution more firmly. As this happens, academics become unhappy with what is happening and this, in some cases, leads to a decision to leave, requiring the recruitment of new staff who are not familiar with the context.

Evidence of the authoritarian management structure at the University can be discerned in documents such as the Minutes of the Senate Committee on Teaching and Learning. Although the institutional Teaching and Learning Centre, the Centre for Higher Education Teaching and Learning, is active in running workshops and other activities intended to enhance quality in this core area of institutional functioning, very little discussion takes place in the Senate Committee, which tends to function as information sessions about what needs to be done. In addition, it is observable that Schools do little reporting on their own activities to the Committee.

It is not only in Senate Committees that the absence of debate is noticeable. The Higher Education Quality Committee's Audit Report states that deans and other senior academics admit that ' . . . [t]he Senate at THE UNIVERSITY OF VENDA appears to

operate in a relatively weak manner' (South African Council on Higher Education, 2011: 22). What is often shared are issues that come from above which require action from the academics. Another issue is that discussions concerning teaching and learning policies are very rare. Deans, whose responsibility it is to represent academics, do not play a radical role in challenging the status quo; instead they sit and take information as it comes from the Chair. In this way, the management and governance structures can be seen to constrain the appreciation of policies and, indeed, understandings of the need for and nature of quality assurance more generally. According to the Internal Audit Report prepared by the external auditing company, PricewaterhouseCoopers (2012) on teaching and learning at The University of Venda, it is reported that there was no evidence on how the teaching and learning policy was discussed at school or departmental levels.

It is also apparent that governance and management structures are guilty of lack of attention to detail, possibly because of the lack of support available from a well managed committee secretariat. According to the PricewaterhouseCoopers report noted above, an item on the peer observation of teaching was held over from the meeting of the Senate Committee on Teaching and Learning held in November 2012. When the Committee next met in March 2013, the item was omitted from the agenda. None of the committee members, including the Chair, observed this oversight and the meeting proceeded without any discussion of the item. The management and governance structure can thus be seen to have a number of fundamental weaknesses.

Events such as those described above will be explored in more detail in the next chapter. For now, it is important simply to note that management structures continue to condition the institution.

5.2.5 Infrastructure

According to the Report of the Ministerial Committee on the Funding of Higher Education (Ministry of Higher Education and Training, October 2013: 182) it is reported that the Higher Education Quality Committee's audit reports and submissions to the Committee by historically disadvantaged institutions suggest a general lack of physical infrastructure, laboratories, lecture theatres, library and computer resources and student

housing. This situation is further worsened by poor maintenance regimes and the rapid growth of enrolments figures in these institutions whose carrying capacities do not match student numbers. Infrastructure can be seen to have been conditioned by apartheid and particularly by the apartheid funding structures discussed above. A lack of capacity to manage funding and instability in management structures following the opening up of the higher education system in the early 1990s can then be seen to have exacerbated the situation. This can be seen to be the case at The University of Venda in particular.

The University of Venda was founded on the site of an old agricultural school in the early 1980s. The classrooms available at this time remained the main buildings until the early 2000s with the exception of a few other buildings such as the library, the School of Agriculture and the Main Administration Block. Although student numbers expanded rapidly, infrastructure development remained stagnant. The current eight Schools comprising the University were all in existence at the end of the 1990s, although some restructuring of departments and curricula has taken place. Student numbers have increased enormously, however.

The problem with infrastructure, as already indicated, is not only limited to academic buildings. The Higher Education Quality Committee's Audit Report, for example, noted the poor state of residential accommodation available to students as follows:

The Panel heard from management and students about overcrowded residences. Close to 6 000 students are accommodated in residences that were originally designed for just over 2 000 students. This is a matter of grave concern as fundamental infrastructure, such as sewerage, is bound to collapse under such pressure. Also, overcrowded residences are not conducive to the creation of an appropriate learning environment (South African Council on Higher Education, 2011: 20).

The structural conditions noted earlier in this chapter have obviously contributed to the ailing infrastructure, although Archer's idea of 'promotive interest groups' also needs consideration in examining this phenomenon. Archer (1995) defines promotive interest groups as organised interest groups responsible for expansion through the activities of

corporate agents, where corporate agents are defined as groups:

. . . who are aware of what they want, can articulate it to themselves and others, and have organized in order to get it, can engage in concerted action to re-shape or retain the structural or cultural feature in question (1995: 258).

Arguably the focus of interest at the inception of the new democracy in South Africa was cultural change. For instance, corporate agents would form promotive interest groups aimed at curbing racism or ensuring fair treatment in an institution. In this process, structural conditions related to infrastructure could have been overlooked.

Of significance in this discussion, however, is the observation that structural conditioning during apartheid led to a failure to develop infrastructure, deficiencies in which continue to this day and impact on the daily functioning of academics.

5.2.6 The student body

As already indicated, apartheid ideology constructed universities such as The University of Venda for particular goals. The achievement of these goals, according to apartheid thinking, did not require substantial resourcing. The provision of high-quality academics to teach in ratios favourable to student learning was not part of the plan for institutions established in the 'homelands'. The staff–student ratio at The University of Venda continues to be structured by this history.

Despite the failure to develop infrastructure, The University of Venda has experienced a rapid increase in student numbers since 1994. This increase has not been unique to The University of Venda but is a trend which strengthened from the early 1990s across the higher education sector nationally. In this respect, South Africa was following global trends in higher education enrolments. According to the Report of the Vice Chancellor and Principal for 2012, The University of Venda had an enrolment figure of 10,342 (The University of Venda, 2012: 11). This was 6% below the enrolment target agreed with the Department of Higher Education and Training of 11,000 for 2011 to 2013. Although the enrolment figure is lower than the Department of Higher Education and Training's target, the institution continues to be challenged with respect to the student–staff ratio.

According to the Higher Education Quality Committee's Audit Report (2011: 17), the student to staff ratios are much higher than the Department of Higher Education and Training's norm of 20:1, an observation which led to a concern, on the part of auditors, that the provision of quality teaching and learning could be impacted negatively. On implication this challenges the University to fast track its staffing challenges in both administrative and academic spheres. However, other structures such as funding inevitably come into play when such challenges are considered. For now, however, it is sufficient to point out that the student-staff structure at The University of Venda continues to play a part in conditioning events and experiences related to teaching and learning, particularly given the type of students enrolled by the University.

5.3 The cultural system at T1

My analysis of T₁ thus far has focused on the structural conditioning in place at The University of Venda. Following Archer's argument for analytical dualism, I now move on to explore cultural conditions.

Danermark et al. (2002: 33) rightly argue that concepts are not only 'about' or 'within' a particular context but in fact form an important (*constitutive*) part of any social phenomenon. As social realists argue against the existence of an 'isolated' micro world insulated from the socio-cultural system which cannot have any influence on it whatsoever, Archer prefers to talk about linkage between the 'social' (micro) and the systemic (macro) (Archer 1995: 10). My analysis in this section of this chapter focuses only on the macro level at The University of Venda.

I do this by analysing dominant discourses. As I have indicated in Chapter Four of this thesis, critical realists (see, for example, Fairclough et al., 2001) consider discourses to be mechanisms at the level of the Real. They can thus be seen, in Archer's terms, to possess CEPs, which are activated when agents exercise their own PEPs to draw on them.

My identification of discourses at T₁ draws on an analysis of documentation at The University of Venda, and particularly of teaching and learning policies.

5.3.1 The discourse of fitness for purpose

[The] purpose of this policy is to ensure that the manner in which teaching and learning are carried out at the University of Venda supports the vision and mission statement of the University (University of Venda, 2009).

A discourse of 'fitness for purpose' is clearly evident in this purpose statement from The University of Venda's Teaching and Learning Policy (2009). This is in line with Shore and Wright's (2000: 73) claim that audit processes have taken 'quality teaching' away from the classroom into the mission of universities defined by management teams who are removed from classroom practice. This then means that ordinary academics are distanced from what is constructed as 'quality' teaching as, at worse, they may be unaware of the mission identified by management teams or they may choose not to subscribe to it. At best, it is a challenge for academics to link the mission and vision of their institution with the courses that they teach, especially if those courses have remained in place for many years.

In the early 2000s, South African higher education was subject to a sizing and shaping exercise (Ministry of Education, 2001, 2002) involving a number of mergers in pursuit of the 'transformation' of the higher education system called for by the demise of apartheid. In this process, the 36 institutions of the apartheid era were reduced to 23 as a result of a series of mergers and incorporations. At the same time, three institutional types emerged: traditional universities, universities of technology and comprehensive universities. The University of Venda was designated a comprehensive university mandated to offer a mixture of traditional and vocational programmes. The challenge of achieving comprehensive status was taken up with enthusiasm by the Vice Chancellor appointed in 2009. The extent to which the vision and mission developed at that time was shared by academics in the University is, however, questionable. The discourse of 'fitness for purpose' therefore runs the risk of alienating academics even further from the institution that employs them and the goals it has identified for itself.

While the discourse of fitness for purpose emerges strongly in the Teaching and Learning Policy, elsewhere, a discourse of quality as excellence is evident. The Policy on the Monitoring of Teaching and Learning, for example, notes that the University ‘pursues national/international standards of excellence in teaching and learning.’ A number of commentators including Harvey and Green (1993), Readings (1996: 21–43) and Barnett (2004) critique the concept of excellence in relation to higher education with Readings (1996: 32) noting that:

. . . [e]xcellence is invoked . . . as always, to say precisely nothing at all: it deflects attention from the questions of what quality and pertinence might be, who actually are the judges of a relevant or a good University, and by what authority they become those judges.

According to Barnett (2004: 64), the idea of excellence stands ‘for no purpose, no ideal and no concept in particular’. Given the conditions which constrain teaching and learning at The University of Venda, once again it would appear that this discourse of excellence is aspirational and that, at the very least, there is considerable confusion around definitions of quality on the part of the institutional leadership and others writing policies.

Associated with the discourse of fitness for purpose are other discourses related to strategic management. From these, the emergence of a set of practices can be discerned which include the development of a strategic plan (The University of Venda, 2012). The University management can therefore be seen to have made strides to fit in to the propositional register of higher education transformation. A strategic plan was developed to assist with the commitment to achieve the mission and vision. Concern remains however regarding the extent to which academics have been consulted in this process and whether, therefore, these discourses simply pass them by.

5.3.2 The discourse of the learning environment

The university’s Teaching and Learning Policy consistently refers to the learning environment. For example:

The key to successful teaching and learning should be based on a positive conducive learning environment where learners are treated with respect

This discourse accords agency to students. It does this by emphasising the context in which that agency can be exercised – a conducive context allows students to exercise the agency to learn successfully. A number of problems can be identified with the ideas promoted by this discourse. In the first place, many learning theorists would argue that there are many different kinds of learning, each of which is based on values and attitudes about what can count as knowledge and how that knowledge can be known. Bernstein (1999), for example, acknowledges horizontal and vertical discourses, where horizontal discourses are indicative of commonsense knowledge and horizontal discourses represent the codified and principled knowledge of the academy where sense is made of empirical data in order to produce theory. Learning is dependent on recognising these different kinds of knowledge and the ways of knowing associated with them. Academic learning is dependent on understanding the ‘rules’ for making academic knowledge – rules about evidence and so on. While immersing a student in a context might, in principle, allow him/her to begin to identify what can count as knowledge and how it might be known, other theorists (such as Vygotsky, 1978) argue for the role of social interaction in learning, and more significantly for the role played by ‘more knowledgeable others’ as they guide or mentor learners in particular tasks. Privileging context at the expense of such social interaction can thus be seen to be problematic.

At The University of Venda, and in the context of this discourse, the idea of the ‘conducive learning environment’ is particularly problematic given the lack of infrastructure, poor staff–student ratios and so on noted in various documents produced by the university. Academic staff are scathing about the state of facilities and the lack of infrastructure as the following extract from an interview indicates:

How do you now renovate the hall when we have to write and sit for exam? Graduation has passed. If it was before, yet it is a venue, north wing what centre. I have been lecturing, four of us in a hall, yet there is no microphone but

it's a hall. Four different lecturers lecturing loudly, now we are competing with voices.

A senior lecturer from the School of Health Sciences has this to say about infrastructure: 'Policies I think they there; but infrastructure? It's not here at Venda!'

It could well be the case, therefore, that the discourse of the conducive learning environment functions in some sort of aspirational way in the institutional context. Nonetheless, it remains problematic as cultural conditioning for teaching and learning.

5.3.3 The discourse of students as autonomous beings

Many statements in the Teaching and Learning Policy emphasise student autonomy. For example,

. . . learners are treated with respect and given the autonomy of their integrated learning within a comprehensive enterprise.

and:

The University of Venda aims to

- Take [a] student-centred approach to teaching and learning. This encourages students to take responsibility for their own learning, becoming increasingly independent learners (both alone and in groups).

The idea of students as autonomous independent learners in academic contexts assumes a great deal of social and cultural capital on the part of these students. It assumes that students will know how to learn and will recognise the 'rules' for learning in an academic context. At the same time as this discourse promotes this sort of thinking, other discourses emphasise the weakness of the student body (see section 5.2.3 above), thanks to their 'poor schooling background'. Again, it would appear, if social learning theorists are heeded, that, in order to become independent autonomous learners, students would require a great deal of mentoring and guidance which the staff student ratio precludes.

As the ideal student is constructed as an independent and autonomous learner, staff are constructed as 'facilitators' of learning. So, for example, the Policy states

The academic, as a facilitator, is responsible for the implementation of the University's approach to teaching and learning within his/her teaching activities.

The idea of teaching as 'learning facilitation' has become dominant in South Africa following the introduction of outcomes-based education into the general schooling system. As many commentators in this arena have pointed out (see, for example, Chisholm, 2003), the shift from the traditional role played by teachers in authoritarian classrooms, where teachers were seen as the fount of all knowledge, to that of the 'learning facilitator' supporting and guiding students in the construction of knowledge is enormous. As indicated earlier in this chapter, authoritarianism was a characteristic of apartheid education, with the result that the extent to which this has been embedded in the cultural register related to teaching and learning at The University of Venda cannot be underestimated. The discourse of the autonomous student, which encompasses a role for teachers as learning facilitators, therefore has the potential to be enormously problematic.

The following extract from the Teaching and Policy encapsulates this discourse and, in doing so, effectively absolves the University for any responsibility for students learning other than creating a 'conducive context':

The primary responsibility for the learning process lies with the student who must ensure that he/she is familiar with the University's approach to teaching and learning, and is informed of the learning opportunities that have been created and the availability of relevant academic support initiatives.

5.3.4 The discourse of external authority

The construction of historically black universities as particular 'creatures' of the apartheid state has been noted earlier in this chapter, with concomitant effects on the authoritarianism of management and the subservience of others in response. The Higher Education Quality Committee's Audit Report (South African Council on Higher Education, 2011) states that deans and other senior academics admit that '[t]he Senate at THE UNIVERSITY OF VENDA appears to operate in a relatively weak manner' (South African Council on Higher Education, 2011: 22). By this, one can understand that

the Senate, the most senior academic body, is not a location of robust debate. Boughey and McKenna's (2011a, 2001b) study of other universities in South Africa notes that, at some types of university, this most senior body often functions more as an administrative mechanism 'rubber-stamping' decisions made by management, and often in response to external pressures and authorities. The senate chamber thus becomes a site, not for debate, but rather for mere information sharing.

This observation of The University of Venda Senate made by the Higher Education Quality Committee can be linked to a discourse of external authority evident in policy documents. The discourse of external authority attests to the continuation of the cultural conditions associated with the University's apartheid history and the practices which continue to sustain it. The Teaching and Learning Policy begins, for example, by stating the 'regulatory framework' in which it is located, which includes The Higher Education Act 101 of 1997, The University of Venda Statute, the Higher Education Quality Committee's (South African Council on Higher Education, 2004b) *Criteria for Programme Accreditation*, the Higher Education Quality's (South African Council on Higher Education, 2004c) *Criteria for Institutional Audits* and the Higher Education Quality Committee's (South African Council on Higher Education, 2004c) *Improving Teaching & Learning Resource*.

To some extent, this direct appeal to external authority can be seen to be linked to understandings of old funding mechanisms. The Policy notes, for example, that the University:

. . . aims to develop excellent working relationships with the professional bodies responsible for the enhancement of teaching and learning and to exploit developmental funding opportunities provided

illuminating the idea that funding is linked to subservience to external authority and does not come as a right.

In the spirit of this subservience to authority, the University then exercises its right to surveillance on its staff through the use of 'evaluation and monitoring mechanisms' in respect of teaching and learning. The purpose of this surveillance, however, is to ensure that the 'opinions' of 'stakeholders' (which would include external authorities) are taken into account:

The University of Venda aims to

- Keep the evaluation and monitoring mechanisms under review and enhance their impact and the effectiveness of the ways in which stakeholder's opinions are heard and responded to.

The commitment to compliance is strong in this policy. However, the extent to which members of the academic staff share this commitment will be explored later in this thesis. For now, however, the following comment from one of the interviews conducted as part of this study indicates some of the resistance to policy evident at The University of Venda. The participant interviewed notes that he/she does read the policies and:

I immediately circulate them, from CHETL, from IPQA [but the staff members] will say we are not administrators, we are not HODs.... On this they were saying that is one for HODs and managers, it is a CHETL thing and I said 'No, no, it must be a daily bread of your own portfolio of evidence.

From this quotation, then, it might appear that staff members deal with the discourse of external authority by allocating responsibility for compliance to others – to heads of departments and managers. Certainly, it would appear that compliance to external authority in relation to matters related to quality assurance is not seen as a matter of everyday academic practice.

5.3.5 The policing discourse

Arguably related to the discourse of external authority, discussed in 5.3.4 above, is a strong 'policing' discourse associated with monitoring and evaluation. Institutional audits, regardless of claims about their potential to contribute to quality enhancement, essentially function as monitoring mechanisms, and the South African experience of the first round of quality audits conducted by the Higher Education Quality Committee would seem to confirm this.

Internally, some of the first mechanisms related to the quality assurance introduced at institutional level related to the evaluation and monitoring of teaching and learning. This was the case at The University of Venda, where mechanisms extend to an actual policy on the Monitoring of Teaching and Learning. This policy constructs academics as responsible for evaluation and thus involves them in their own surveillance:

Course coordinators/HoDs are responsible for initiating student evaluation of modules, but Deans, and the DVC Academic may also initiate.

Interestingly, the policy provides for more senior members of staff to step in and 'initiate' evaluations if necessary. The strong policing role accorded to evaluation is then emphasised by the following provision:

The student evaluation questionnaire results are provided to the course coordinator/HoD and to the Dean. The DVC Academic will be given access to the evaluation results.

In spite of this, other statements in the policy indicate a developmental purpose for evaluation:

The University will use student evaluation questionnaire results for quality assurance purposes and are intended to inform decisions on course/module development and the overall process of monitoring the effectiveness of courses.

The construct of course effectiveness, can, of course be linked to the focus on throughput and graduation rates, which comes about through the incentive-based nature of the funding formula. The question is however one of 'whose decisions' the results of evaluation will inform. It would appear therefore, that the discourse of monitoring

and evaluation can be linked to other authoritarian discourses evident at The University of Venda.

5.3.6 The discourse of scholarship of teaching and learning

The construct of the scholarship of teaching and learning can be traced to Boyer's (1990) seminal work *Scholarship Reconsidered*, which posited four types of scholarship: the scholarship of discovery, the scholarship of integration, the scholarship of application and the scholarship of teaching and learning. Since the time of the publication of this work, the scholarship of teaching and learning has become particularly prevalent, thanks to the increased attention being paid to teaching in the wake of an increase in the percentage of young people entering higher education and the increased diversity this has brought to student bodies across the globe.

In South Africa, the construct of the scholarship of teaching and learning has been promoted by those working in Teaching and Learning Centres and also by professional organisations such as the Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern Africa (HELTASA), which have sought to enhance the status of teaching, particularly in comparison to research, at universities across the country. This focus has often been adopted by management teams, and statements about the scholarship of teaching and learning are appearing in policy documents. The University of Venda is no exception:

The University of Venda aims to

- Have teaching which is informed by research, scholarship, expertise and enthusiasm.

The introduction of a new, incentive-based funding formula to South African higher education in 2002 has brought renewed focus on research because of the financial benefits which accrue from 'research units', which include papers published in accredited journals. This focus has contributed to teaching becoming a site for research with individuals, who often may not have senior postgraduate qualifications, using their teaching to become researchers. A strong cynical position might be that the focus on

research into teaching, often found in statements such that quoted above and in the statement, from the same policy document, that the 'University of Venda regards teaching and learning as informed by research', derives from an interest in pushing all staff members to become research active. There is, however, a need for research into teaching given that much of what is done is based on commonsense, which can be faulted by theory-based research. An even greater argument for the need for research-based teaching can be found in the changed student bodies of universities. Academics often teach on the basis of the way they themselves were taught. Since their time as students, however, not only have student demographics changed but also the world has changed.

At The University of Venda, although the policy encourages teaching that is informed by research, commitment to this is not evident in the context of constant complaints of swelling student numbers and a lack of administrative and secretarial assistance in academic departments (South African Council on Higher Education, 2011). Academics often find themselves in a dual position which leads to a role clash. A lecturer who is also head of department will be cognisant of the demands on staff because of failures to control student numbers and provide administrative support. At the same time, he/she has to promote the interest of the University by establishing research-informed teaching. Archer (1995) attests that roles and role sets may clash, precisely because their associated normative expectations collide or the sum of their resource requirements exceeds total disposable assets. Hence it may be difficult for corporate agents who are managing departments while teaching on the one hand and also offering admin and secretarial duties on the other hand, to focus on encouraging and enforcing lecturers to practise research-informed teaching.

Associated with the discourse of the scholarship of teaching and learning are other discourses related to teaching and learning practices promoted in the international literature on student learning and teaching in higher education. One of these, evident in The University of Venda Assessment Policy, for example, focuses on the use of assessment as a tool for student learning:

As assessment exerts one of the most powerful influences on the nature and extent of student learning, this policy especially emphasises the design of assessment to promote student learning.

As I will aim to show in Chapter Six, academics make little conscious effort to satisfy policy requirements in respect of this point. My analysis of interviews revealed that this particular discourse was not taken up by those members of the staff who participated in this study. In critical realist terms, at the level of the Actual, the failure of departments and faculties to promote, for example, the scrutiny of assessment tasks to ensure that they do serve a developmental purpose also, is also evidence of the fact that the discourse does not result in practice. Where attention is paid to assessment this is usually in relation to its purpose of measuring student learning.

While the international literature related to the scholarship of teaching and learning might have much to say in relation to 'best practice', there is little evidence that this informs practice at the University.

5.3.7 The discourse of staff development

Like many other universities in South Africa, The University of Venda established a Teaching and Learning Centre as part of the structural elaboration associated with the first round of institutional audits (Boughey and McKenna, in press). This centre, the Centre for Higher Education Teaching and Learning, in collaboration with the Staff Development Unit of the Human Resources Directorate, focuses on the development of academic staff. The Centre for Higher Education Teaching and Learning has managed to convince a substantial number of academics to enroll for the postgraduate diploma in higher education teaching with accredited institutions in South Africa. Some have completed, while others are in their second year of study, and others are lobbying for admission in the next intake.

The activities of the Centre for Higher Education Teaching and Learning, and the decision of academics to take up opportunities related to their roles as educators in higher education, can be seen to be related to a strong discourse of staff development. The Policy on Teaching and Learning notes that one of the aims of the University is to

'[p]romote and develop [the] teaching skills of academic staff'. The need for academic staff members to be developed in their roles as educators to meet the demands of transformation can be traced back to the late 1980s (Walker and Badsha, 1993). As Boughey (2012) points out, in the mid-1980s, claims started to be made about the readiness of South African universities to meet the demands of a new social order which would result from democracy. Until then, the focus had been on supporting and developing students to fit in to unchanged institutions (ibid.). As it became apparent that a new social order was at hand, calls were made for institutional transformation in the form of staff development and curriculum development (see, for example, Vilakazi and Tema, 1985). These calls were initially located firmly in discourses of equity. However, as Boughey (2007) points out, as the 1990s wore on, new discourses related to the need for efficiency in the face of globalisation began to emerge in the South African Academic Development movement. Arguably, the discourse of staff development, discernible in policy documents at The University of Venda, is related to the latter, especially given the focus on the need for universities to improve their student throughput and graduation rates. Nonetheless, it plays an important role in constructing the role of academic staff which, as will be seen later, is, to some extent, resisted in spite of efforts on the part of the Centre for Higher Education Teaching and Learning.

5.3.8 The discourse of reward

The calls for transformation involving the development of academic staff noted in section 5.3.6 above emerged in the context of an awareness of a shift to democracy in the late 1980s. The extent to which academic staff themselves have drawn on discourses related to equity is, however, questionable. Universities have, nevertheless, responded to the perceived need for staff development programmes in other ways, most notably by building rewards for good teaching into institutional structures such as appointment policies and policies for personal promotion. The University of Venda is no different, with the Teaching and Learning Policy declaring that:

[The] University is responsible for the acknowledgement and reward of effective teaching, ensuring that students and lecturers are familiar with the implications of

the chosen approach to teaching and learning and making available sufficient, suitable resources in support of teaching and learning.

Rewards for good teaching do not only include appointment and promotions since, along with many other universities in South Africa, The University of Venda has introduced an annual Teaching Award system. This system is matched at a national level by Teaching Excellence Awards offered jointly by the Council on Higher Education and the Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association for Southern Africa (HELTASA). The Department of Higher Education and Training (DoHET) has also promoted rewards for teaching through the use of its Teaching Development Grant. One area of the grant is specified for the purpose of 'enhancing teaching', and universities have been funded to offer teaching awards. The discourse of 'reward for teaching' extends beyond The University of Venda therefore and is accompanied by a set of associated structures and practices nationally.

This discourse, then, is the 'carrot' for good teaching, as opposed to the 'stick' discernable in discourses related to regulatory frameworks associated with quality assurance.

5.4 Conclusion

As I have attempted to show in my analysis of structural and cultural conditions at The University of Venda at T_1 , the institutional environment is not always conducive to quality teaching and learning. While policies attempt to identify and guide the introduction of good teaching practices, the most overwhelming discourses are authoritarian in nature and hark back to the institution's apartheid past. Where other discourses are introduced (such as those related to the scholarship of teaching and learning and the best practices identified in this field) take up of practices associated with them may be limited because of constraining structural conditions.

As Archer (1995) argues, more often than not it is the structural system that changes more quickly than the cultural system. I concur with this claim, which is further confirmed by Boughey and McKenna (in press) in their analysis of higher education institutions of South Africa. They discovered (Boughey and McKenna, 2011a) that The

University of Venda has seen the instantiation of a substantial number of new structures since quality assurance began to be implemented in South African higher education. In the next sections I discuss various structures that are responsible for conditioning at The University of Venda. Some of these structures are contingent on events and ideologies at a national level while others were driven by internal considerations.

CHAPTER SIX: SOCIO-CULTURAL AND STRUCTURAL INTERACTION BETWEEN T₂ AND T₃.

6.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, and using Archer's morphogenetic framework, I analyse the structural and cultural systems that, at T₁, condition the way agents interact with cultural emergent powers and properties (CEPs) and structural emergent powers and properties (SEPs) from T₂ to T₃. This analysis allows me to begin to see the way agents are conditioned either to implement, or not implement, policies and procedures related to quality assurance at The University of Venda. Since the focus was only at the systems level, it implies that it was at the macro context level. Archer (1995: 11) describes the macro context level as the systemic properties that are always confronted by micro social interaction. The micro social interaction level involves social activities between 'the people' and 'the parts' in a given social milieu. At this micro-social interaction level, the macro system might be reproduced (morphostasis) or transformed (morphogenesis). Thus, the focus of this chapter has shifted to the interaction level (T₂ to T₃), wherein agents interact with the systems at the cultural and structural levels.

What is of interest in this interaction is the agents' response to their contact with systems that are not of their own making. As Archer (1995, 1996, 2000) argues, even though socio-cultural interaction is conditioned by the systems level, it is not solely determined by this conditioning context. Instead, she argues that agents have causal powers to effect change (Archer, 2000).

As discussed in Chapter Four, I use Fairclough's (1989) critical discourse analysis to explore the way agents exercise their personal emergent powers and properties in relation to the domain of culture. As also indicated in Chapter Four, I understand the domain of culture to be discursively constituted and discourses, following Kress (1985), to be 'clumps' of ideas which 'hang together' in language and other sign systems and which constrain and enable what it is possible to say, do and so on. Following Fairclough et al. (2001), I also understand discourses to function as mechanisms at the level of the Real. My analysis of the way individuals exercise their personal emergent

powers and properties to interact with cultural emergent powers and properties is therefore dependent on an understanding of discourse and of critical discourse analysis.

In more practical terms, this means that, in this chapter, I will be exploring the way individuals subscribe to, or resist, discourses they encounter in the cultural milieu in which they find themselves. Some discourses will be supportive of the implementation of quality assurance policies and procedures; others will not be supportive. I identify these discourses as a result of the interviews I conducted with academics. My analysis of individuals' interaction with structural emergent powers and properties is also derived from interview data. As I indicated, in Chapter Four I identified structures based on my knowledge of the material world and the world of higher education in particular. Archer argues for the separation of culture and structure for analytical purposes only. In practice, structure and culture are intertwined as 'the parts'. In this chapter, although I identify elements of structure and culture separately, I also bring them together as 'constraining conditions' by linking structure and discourses. I trust this will become apparent as the chapter proceeds.

The first part of the chapter is an analysis of interviews with academics of the School of Health Sciences. I then move on to an analysis of those from individuals working in the School of Human and Social Sciences. This is in line with my research design which identifies two sub-cases within the overall case of The University of Venda.

6.2 The School of Health Sciences

6.2.1 Constraining conditions

6.2.1.1 Multiple meanings of quality

As I indicate in Chapter Three of this thesis, the definition of quality in higher education is extremely complex. Harvey and Green (1993) point to a number of possible definitions each of which is shown to be problematic. As I also point out, the definition of quality adopted by the Higher Education Quality Committee is that of 'fitness for and of purpose' combined with 'value for money' and 'transformation'. It is apparent from my data that this definition, used at a national level, is not commonly understood amongst

staff at The University of Venda. Even more problematic are the multiple definitions in use in the School.

The Dean, for example, explained quality in the following way:

We define it in terms of competency outcome; what is it that we achieve and when we teach students. We define it in terms of the quality of staff the discipline and are you qualified to teach a particular discipline so here we are discipline based in this school . . . if we assign a facilitator who has advanced knowledge on that, so that's how we define quality.

Echoes of the notion of 'fitness for purpose' can be discerned in the Dean's explanation of quality. The idea of 'competency outcomes', for example, can be seen as purposes to be fulfilled through the teaching and learning process. Similarly, the idea of 'quality staff' can also be seen to contribute to fitness of purpose, although there is a disjuncture between the focus on quality as 'advanced knowledge' in the discipline and the achievement of competency outcomes. An academic could be educated to the highest levels and have an excellent research profile but might still not be able to work with outcomes-based approaches (or indeed problem-based approaches) to education.

Another lecturer from the same department defines quality as follows:

. . . quality is that when they, we do have objectives that we supposed to achieve at the end of any lecture or any session that we're having. For me to deliver quality, I need to be sure that I'm effective and efficient, so that at the end those students that I'm teaching, they need to have achieved those objectives

This participant can also be seen to draw on the notion of 'fitness for purpose' in her identification of the objectives set for lectures and the need for her teaching to be 'effective and efficient' in order to achieve them. However, objectives are not outcomes, since the term objective usually denotes goals the lecturer has set for teaching while the term outcomes refers to students' achievements in relation to their learning. South Africa has used the construct of the learning outcome in curriculum and programme

design since the late 1990s following the introduction of the National Qualifications Framework. Nearly twenty years on, it would appear that the notion of the learning outcome is not embedded in academic discourses at The University of Venda. A second problem with this participant's definition is that it focuses on the micro level of pedagogy in the classroom when a fitness for purpose approach would incorporate all learning experiences available to students including assessment.

Yet another participant also draws on the construct of fitness for purpose when she notes:

With us when we say quality in teaching and learning we check the content we teach, we also look at the methods that we use, we also look at the provision of the information, we also look at the, as I said previously we also check question papers, we also look at the tests

However, this participant goes on to identify another facet of quality arguably linked to efficiency discourses in the South African higher education system overall. Earlier in this chapter, I noted the introduction of a performance-based funding formula to South African higher education in 2004. This funding formula rewards throughput and graduation in 'minimum' time. As a result, many universities with the kind of appalling student performance data identified by Scott, Yeld and Hendry (2007) have introduced measures to improve performance. Often these measures include 'early warning systems' which attempt to identify students who are beginning to fail so they can be referred to support systems. This participant refers to such systems as follows:

We also . . . quality goes hand in hand with the identification of risks among students. Any risk we realize or identify there . . . it has to be possible . . . we also refer our students to the maybe counselling . . . where we can sit around the table with the student then counsel the student. At the end we send the student to the counselling section

Although identifying students who are 'at risk' of failure can be seen to be part of an overall understanding of teaching and learning being 'fit for purpose', the response on the part of the department in which this participant works seems to be to send the

student out for counselling rather than to look at the programme itself to see whether it could better provide the learning experiences which will allow the student to achieve the outcomes. Sending the student for counselling locates the 'problem' within the student rather than in the context in which learning needs to take place.

The following extract from an interview with a head of department in the School provides an indication of a much more comprehensive understanding of quality as involving 'fitness for purpose'.

Firstly, we have to understand what is expected, like I was saying before, myself I didn't realise that thin line between learning and teaching. To me it was a matter of first just a lecturer, giving students some information and test them and that's it. But there were so many things that made me to realise that for me to make sure that teaching and learning has taken place. So those things have to be in place as well. How I understand quality, it will involve, how will I put it, it will involve the processes - how I do things nay? It touches matters like assessment and to, making sure that you are assessing transparently, correctly, fairly and all those things, and then at the end we are achieving what we have set for to achieve.

This participant's definition of quality moves even closer to the notion of fitness of purpose with her comment that:

Firstly you, we have to understand the aim or the goal of what we wanted to achieve, then we set our objectives, our 'going to achieve'. And then we, when we do the learning material, it also has to match what we have said you want to achieve. So everything has to sort of feedback to what we have said and we want to achieve.

In recent years, The University of Venda has invested enormously in the development of staff as professional educators, employing facilitators from another South African university to run courses on issues such as assessment and curriculum development. As a result, and in addition, some members of staff have chosen to enrol in the Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Education programme at the University offering the

short courses at The University of Venda. The discourse of this particular participant can be seen to draw on some of the discourses used in this staff development, for example, the idea that assessment needs to be transparent and fair.

One final definition of quality apparent in interviews with members of staff from the School involves a heavy focus on 'policing' by senior members of staff, although the idea of moderating assessment and of mentoring junior members of staff can also be seen to be in accord with the idea of 'fitness for purpose':

I can say the teaching is fine but I'm not sure to what extent because let's say if I'm teaching as a junior there is somebody who is senior who is overlooking at whatever I'm doing and correcting me, sort of a mentor, I can say in terms of mentorship it is good in quality. If you are a junior staff and you teach a certain module there is someone who is an expert in that field, in times he go with you and then when you mark that person should have to look at those things. The same applies to tests and exams, what we do usually is when you set a paper, and then after setting that paper the mentor should look at it.

While mentoring and moderation from more senior members of staff can be seen to be positive, the achievement of 'quality' in the sense of teaching and learning being 'fit for purpose' would be dependent on the understandings of teaching and learning (and indeed of quality) brought to the process by that more senior person.

When asked directly about what they understood of the construct of 'fitness for purpose', academics in the School noted:

I never understand that fitness for purpose. Fitness for purpose I know it's a programme in the outcome and then the purpose is for development of skills and competence and then it's there curriculum or the programme internationally recognised

Similarly,

What I understand is that what we are doing, as I was saying that we would set the goals, the goal must be informed by something. So if it's fit for purpose, it means the goal must be aiming for something to achieve. Like for an example,

what I understand by switching from the traditional curriculum to PBL, was the main aim was to be able to train our students to be able to be independent or long life learners.

And

I think, although I won't say that's according to how the Department isn't explaining it, but whenever we are preparing our work, or whenever we are delivering the teaching to our students or even if it's research, I think that is what we are focusing on; that at the end the students should produce what they are taught. So as I'm saying that when we are providing the teaching that we are doing, the focus mostly is on that we need to deliver quality teaching and to produce the quality students.

As these extracts from the interviews show, understandings of 'fitness for purpose' focus heavily on the achievement of outcomes or objectives although the idea of a programme being 'constructively aligned' (Biggs, 1999) to enhance students' chances of achieving those goals is not apparent. In addition, there is confusion with regard to accreditation and, simply, introducing new pedagogies such as problem-based learning.

I believe that there is sufficient evidence in the data to show that academics in the School are concerned about quality. However, the lack of a common discursively constructed understanding of quality shared from the Dean through heads of departments to individual lecturers hinders its achievement and inevitably impacts on the way quality assurance policies and procedures will be implemented. However, it is not only amongst academics that confused understandings exist, as my analysis of the teaching and learning policies of the University which now follows will show.

As I have indicated in Chapter Three of this thesis, in 2009 policies on teaching and learning were developed, somewhat hurriedly, in view of the impending audit by the Higher Educational Quality Committee. Given the urgent need for policy, they were developed by a single individual, the then Head of the Quality Unit, without input from the rest of the University. Apart from an overarching Policy on Teaching and Learning,

two other policies, on Assessment and the Monitoring of Teaching and Learning also exist.

My analysis of these policies show that they are framed by two overarching discourses: i) a discourse constructing quality as fitness for purpose and ii) a discourse of compliance with external authority. Although the Policy on Teaching and Learning does not overtly draw on a definition of quality as fitness for purpose, the following statement gives a clear indication of an underlying understanding of this nature:

The purpose of this policy is to ensure that the manner in which teaching and learning are carried out at The University of Venda supports the vision and mission of the University.

Both policies then draw on the discourse of compliance by noting the 'regulatory framework' on which they draw. In the case of the Teaching and Learning Policy, this framework includes the Higher Education Act, Act 101 of 1977, (Republic of South Africa, 1997) and The University of Venda Statute, which forms part of this Act. Both policies then cite university regulations such as the *General regulations and General Rules for Degrees, Diplomas, and Certificates* in the Calendar for 2006 (University of Venda, 2006). Arguably, the presence of this discourse of compliance in policies intended to assure and promote quality in teaching and learning is conducive to the constructive of quality itself as compliance.

In the policies, other discourses constructing teaching and learning and teaching and learning practices can be seen to contribute to some of the confusion in academics' understandings and experiences of quality and quality assurance identified above. The Policy on Teaching and Learning, for example, exemplifies a discourse that constructs university teaching as 'facilitation' and academic teachers as 'facilitators'. So, for example,

The academic, as a facilitator, is responsible for the implementation of the University's approach to teaching and learning within his/her teaching activities.

This 'approach' appears to involve taking a

. . . student-centred approach to teaching and learning. This encourages students to take responsibility for their own learning, becoming increasingly independent learners (both alone and in groups), and encourages academic staff to take responsibility for supporting and enabling that learning.

The idea that students should become ‘independent’ learners is then indicative of a set of discourses in the policy which construct learning as the responsibility of the student:

The primary responsibility for the learning process lies with the student who must ensure that he/she is familiar with the University’s approach to teaching and learning, and is informed of the learning opportunities that have been created and the availability of relevant academic support initiatives.

The role of the academic teacher is then to ‘facilitate’ these learning opportunities.

A number of observations can be made in relation to this analysis. In the first place, the discourse constructing students as responsible for their own learning sits alongside another, noted in earlier in this thesis and evident in documents such as those submitted to the panel visiting The University of Venda as part of the institutional audit, that constructs students as ‘disadvantaged’ and ‘weak’. If students are indeed weak, then it is likely that they will need considerable direction and guidance in order to learn. What appears to be happening, therefore, is that the construction of teaching and learning in the Policy is itself not ‘fit for purpose’, given the context of the University. Rather, the author of the Policy appears to have drawn from understandings of teaching and learning in vogue in the international literature on the scholarship of teaching and learning focusing on so called ‘student-centred’ approaches. Critiques of the appropriateness of these approaches to contexts where students arrive without the social and cultural capital (in Archerian terms the ‘personal emergent powers and properties’) to draw on this relatively undirected environment abound (see, for example, Wheelahan, 2010).

Arguably more useful, and more conducive to the pursuit of quality, would have been a policy that followed through on the discourse of quality as ‘fitness for purpose’, based at the outset on procedures related to Biggs’ (1999) notion of ‘constructive alignment’ in which teaching approaches, assessment, learning materials and learning support are all ‘aligned’ with the outcomes for a course or programme. This would have constructed a very different role for academic teachers than the ‘hands off’ role in the current policy.

What would appear to be the case, therefore, is that academics, in exercising their personal powers and properties in relation to teaching and learning, are drawing on a mixed bag of conflicting discourses, discourses that they themselves bring to their task as well as those in the Policy, which functions as a structure exerting structural emergent powers and properties. At the same time, the academics work with their experiences and observations of an environment in which it is evident that students do not have the abilities to act as the autonomous learners constructed in the policy. Given this analysis, it is perhaps not surprising that the implementation of quality assurance policies and procedures is less than one might hope for.

6.2.1.2 Overwork

In Chapter Five, I identify the structures of apartheid, geography and the student body as structures conditioning individuals’ responses in socio-cultural interaction. I see these structures in interplay with what I have termed ‘discourses of overwork’ at The University of Venda. This set of discourses cites, for example, understaffing as a common feature of the academic workplace. The department of Human Resources is then identified as playing a role in this problem, for example, a senior lecturer from the Department of Advanced Nursing Science identifies the aggravating role that the Human Resources Department plays in the challenge of understaffing. This role is perceived to be one of procrastination and of obfuscation.

Staffing they will say ‘Haai . . .’, ‘We’ll . . .’, ‘We’ll . . .’, ‘We’ll . . .’, ‘We’ll . . .’, ‘Uuh . . .’. Human and resource says ‘Hey you don’t have a post’, or you advertise a post [when] somebody leaves [and] it takes six months to appoint.

This set of discourses constructs the Human Resources Department as intentionally applying delaying tactics in finalising academic appointments. In recent years, South African universities have come under particular budgetary constraints as public funding for higher education has failed to keep pace with inflation. This means that, in real terms, academics are required to do more with less as student numbers have also increased. Delays in making appointments can also be seen as attempts to save money in this climate.

More commonly, however, the set of discourses constructs the problem along the academic/administrative divide, where academics cite administrative staff as being inefficient and slow to work as in the quotation above. At The University of Venda, the discourses also identify the lack of administrative staff at departmental level, a phenomenon which results in academics having to take on administrative work. A head of department had this to say when asked what she would change to improve working conditions at The University of Venda:

I would change the first this. I was going to bring a support staff for lecturers because some of the things that makes people not to contain quality is the issue of our lecturers including me . . . they work as typists, they work as messengers, they work as . . . , they take errands at their own. You are to book something you are all over the show you are at vho-Magwabeni and the time to maintain quality is being taken out by this other activities that do not matter so much but benefit [. . .] part of our activities. I would change that every department should have at least one person or maybe two department to share someone who will run the errands for this two department I would say the each department should have a typist, I would say all the department should have the clerk. This clerk must be a person who can type in terms of when my hand[s] are very tied maybe with other things that will make quality best I would give my thing for typing to the typist or clerk.

A junior lecturer from the School participating in my study also drew on discourses of overwork and understaffing:

As academics we do, particularly if we look at almost every department at the University of Venda is understaffed. So now for instance if I'm working here I have to go to Exams to submit there, these students are waiting for me, I have to finalise their research . . .

The same lecturer then continued to draw on these discourses, pointing to their impact on research:

I think really as an academic at the University level, if you look at our workshops when they say that, in terms of research. we are not doing well you will understand because research wants one to give it a certain percentage of time. But if you have to do all this things on your own, like in our department, [it] is really important to have support staff, you see we are doing a lot of things and it is only us.

In 2004, a performance-based funding formula was introduced for all public universities in South Africa (Ministry of Education, 2004). This formula funds research outputs particularly generously on a 'unit' basis. One result of the introduction of the formula is that all universities have begun to promote research in order to increase the number of research units produced. The participant quoted in the extract above notes workshops which aim to increase research production. However, increasing research outputs inevitably places demands on academics who have other areas of work to attend to. This participant, like another quoted earlier, notes the lack of support staff who would alleviate some of this load.

In Chapter Five, I identify geography as a structure that impacts on the University's ability to attract staff. This is particularly the case at more senior levels: highly qualified and well-published black academics are in demand at all South African universities as they try to change the demographics of their staff complement. To some extent, as also noted earlier, The University of Venda has tried to address this problem by recruiting staff from across the African continent, a strategy which also does not come without problems as such staff lack knowledge and experience of South African education as well as of the country's social problems more generally.

A recent document published by the Department of Higher Education and Training

(Department of Higher Education and Training, 2014) notes that, by 2020, the South African higher education system will be short of approximately 7,000 academics thanks to growth in the system and retirements. Given this projected shortage in the system as a whole, it is highly likely that universities, such as The University of Venda, located in deeply rural areas will be impacted more heavily than those in large urban centres. The shortage of academic staff noted above, as well as the concomitant effects on the assurance of quality, is therefore arguably likely to become more commonplace.

In critical realist terms, the discursively-constructed frustration caused by understaffing can be seen to impact negatively on experiences of academics at the level of the Empirical. Overall, my interview data show that academics are demoralised because of this challenge. Boughey and McKenna (2011a) note a 'discourse of despondency' in the research they conducted at historically black campuses (including The University of Venda). One of their conclusions is that the historically black universities had never recovered from the lack of resourcing during apartheid and that, post 1994, problems worsened rather than got better. Time after time, institutions attempted 'turnaround' or 'renewal' strategies only to find these failed once again. The 'discourse of despondency' is related to this phenomenon.

In this context, it is fair to claim that academics fail to honour quality-related policies and procedures because of their workloads and their experiences of being distracted from academic tasks by the need to deal with administrative work.

One last point needs to be made about the set of conditions related to overwork, and this relates to the introduction of problem-based approaches to learning in the School of Health Sciences. Problem-based learning is widely used in the education of health professionals and, indeed, originated in a medical school (Barrows, 1996). This approach to curriculum design involves the use of small-group methodology in which students work together on a problem. Central to the use of problem-based approaches is i) the design of tasks which direct students' learning and ii) the ability of facilitators to provide input on a 'need to know' basis. The latter is important as students 'discover' what they need to know in the course of solving a problem (Hmelo-Silver and Barrows,

1996; Dolmans, de Grave, Wolfhagen and van der Vleuten, 2005). The introduction of problem-based learning into a School not only requires relatively high levels of pedagogical expertise but also the availability of staff to firstly develop the approach and then staff it. The Dean of the School notes particular challenges in this regard:

Staff is still a problem . . . staffing is a problem. But the methodology, the PBL? The PBL it needs many staff members No the University isn't it. It allows us to hire part timers. It allows us . . . now there is your programme tutorship, teaching assistant, mentorship those are strategies that we And you are happy?

In many respects, the employment of part-time staff places enormous demands on time as many such employees are full-time employees elsewhere. Their availability has to be timetabled and the pressure of having two jobs means that dual employees' work demands need to be monitored and managed so that their part-time work is completed properly. In this context, it is not difficult to see how the employment of part-time staff members increases administrative and management demands. At the same time, the Dean also notes the employment of tutors, teaching assistants and mentors and, while it is clear in the interview that she is positive about these developments, it is also apparent that their management is time consuming. As a senior leader in the School, the impact of so much management of staff must inevitably impact on the ability to manage quality.

6.2.1.3 Infrastructure

The most common complaint at The University of Venda, other than staffing, concerns infrastructure. As I indicate in Chapter Five of this thesis, apartheid continues to structure the institution in numerous ways. In the apartheid era, resources were provided for an underclass of students and staff. As democracy approached, it was anticipated that 'redress funding' would be provided to the historically black institutions to put them on a more even par with the historically white institutions. Even though the White Paper on Higher Education (Ministry of Education, 1997) specifically mentions the idea of redress, this funding never materialised in the form envisaged by the historically black institutions.

As Bozalek and Boughey (2012) point out, the introduction of the new funding formula for higher education (Ministry of Education, 2004) further disadvantaged the historically black institutions because of its emphasis on research, which they had never been constructed to undertake, and on efficiency through success, throughput and graduation rates. Given the kinds of students the historically black institutions admitted, they were never going to be able to achieve the same levels of efficiency in student throughput as other universities which attracted very different kinds of students, especially without resources they did not have and which the formula would not provide. A review of the 2004 funding formula conducted by a Ministerial Committee in 2013 (Ministry of Education, 2013) notes that the reasons for the review centred on the failure to consider some critical factors, such as the cost of running certain programmes, the location of some institutions, the historical legacies of the country, the resource- and revenue-raising potential of some universities, and the quality and level of preparedness of students in the original formula. In spite of this, the review has not recommended major changes to the funding formula.

Over time, the lack of funding has impacted on The University of Venda's ability to develop the resources it needs. For a number of years now, the Department of Higher Education and Training has provided 'ear-marked' funding for infrastructure and The University of Venda has benefited from this massively. Nonetheless, infrastructure continues to be a problem.

A participant in my study from the School of Health Sciences had this to say about infrastructure development:

It impacts very badly. Like firstly, from what I was saying, the cohesion of the Department would also be assisted by us being together in one place, but we find somebody else is there, somebody else is there, somebody else is there; throughout this University. So there's no way that we can be having this constant fellowship together, you know, which I think will be building the relationships. It impacts very badly.

It is not only this particular participant's department that suffers from its members being dispersed across different location on the campus. The participant notes the impact of

this dispersal on 'constant fellowship' and 'relationships', but it must also affect the efficient running of the department. When such cases are aggravated by the lack of administrative support identified by participants in 6.2.1.2 above, then it is not difficult to see how the overall efficiency of the department is impacted. This, in turn, would also then affect the implementation of quality assurance policies and procedures.

I have personally experienced the lack of a cohesive working environment and the way this impacts on my own performance. Educational development practitioners from my department are located in four different buildings that are hundreds of metres apart from one another. The office on one side of my own is inhabited by a colleague from the Department of Advanced Nursing Science and that on the other by a staff member from the Student Finance Department. It is not even the case, therefore, that academic staff members are grouped together since, in my case, three neighbouring offices are occupied by individuals from an academic department and a support department and, in my case, a 'third space professional' (Whitchurch, 2013). The ability for colleagues to interact on a daily basis, even informally over events such as a cup of coffee, must impact on shared understandings and shared practices in relation to areas of academic endeavour such as quality assurance.

At other times it would appear that the opposite is the case as this participant, a head of department, notes:

I would also add the resources, resources in terms of infrastructure so that we [. . .] do not have. I mean School of Health Sciences do not even have office we are using one office shared by maybe five. I got staff members who are sharing, five people in one office.

According to de Croon, Sluiter, Kuijer and Frings-Dresen (2005), working in open workplaces reduces privacy and job satisfaction. This lack of job satisfaction could even be stronger in academia because the nature of academic work means that it requires high levels of concentration. Crowded, shared offices could therefore be expected to impact on participants' own experiences of quality and, thus, to the 'discourse of despondency' identified by Boughey and McKenna (2011a) noted earlier in this chapter, and the resultant inertia also identified in the same study.

I have already indicated some of the problems with the lack of physical infrastructure at The University of Venda in Chapter Five of this thesis. Arguably, the need to teach (and learn) in such circumstances has led to what I have termed a 'discourse of survival'. Several participants noted problems with the timetable. For example, one staff member from the School responded to a question about what they would change in the School to improve quality by noting he would:

. . . be sure that our courses are also . . . they are I given the what . . . the classes and a slot.

For this participant, then, simply having an allocated venue and a slot in the timetable would contribute to quality. With limited infrastructure, students and lecturers devise ways and means to survive and use the limited resources that are available. Students and lecturers know that, even if their modules are not allocated a venue in the University main timetable, teaching and learning should take place. This might happen under a tree, at the stadium or in a borrowed hospital classroom as the following extract shows:

The students know that nine o'clock stadium. Then I, when I arrive . . . [I] go straight to the stadium (okay so they know you plan in advance that tomorrow is stadium okay).

In a context where teaching and learning are constructed as surviving in an unsupportive environment, it is hardly surprising that quality-related policies and procedures are not implemented, especially when the discourses constructing quality teaching and learning in those policies are so far removed from academics' experiences of the environment.

The following extract from one of the interviews is indicative of the lack of meaning of policies and procedures for academics:

As the Department no, I don't remember myself like sitting and looking at it, but something will crop up for an example, while we are making our decisions and then somebody will raise this issue and so on. But it's not an instrument that will

really put you in. The same applies as individual, it's when I'm really wanting something, to check something.

Another academic notes that she only read the policies in the context of the demands of a course on assessment for which she had registered:

To be honest, I can say not really, but I went through them when I was doing the Assessment in modules so it was not like reading as if I was reading for me to understand but maybe I was reading because I was having that course. Even after reading them, I can say now if somebody can ask me about those policy, I'm not sure whether I will be in a position to say these are the policies, so in a nutshell I can say I still have to read them.

What might appear to be the case, therefore, is that policies exist as a structure and, as such, possess structural emergent powers and properties, but that individuals only draw on those powers and properties in the context of a discourse of compliance. In themselves, the policies do not exert 'meaning' for academics because of other structural conditions in the School, including overwork, lack of infrastructure and so on.

6.2.2 Enabling conditions

In this section, I discuss conditions enabling the implementation of policies and procedures related to quality assurance in the School of Health Sciences at The University of Venda. Once again I draw on the idea that individuals working in the school possess personal emergent powers and properties which they can exercise to 'activate' structural emergent powers and properties in the domain of structure and cultural emergent powers and properties in the domain of culture. The presence of these structural and cultural emergent powers and properties constitutes enabling or constraining conditions. Here, I focus on enabling conditions. As I will attempt to show, many of these enabling conditions relate to the status of the School as a professional field.

6.2.2.1 Owning the curriculum

Evident in the interviews was a set of discourses related to ownership of the curriculum by academics in the School.

We are involved in decisions regarding teaching and learning. No, we are the people who develop the curriculum.

Similarly,

Ja, I think that one we do in decision, because we all involved in either it's curriculum. If we need to re-curriculate, we are all involved.

This sense of ownership is then evident in a set of events reported in the interviews:

In our department what we do at the beginning of each year, we sit down as a department and then we look at the modules we are having, the number of

Similarly,

We also sit as a Department and check the question papers and stuff but well, it won't be assessment alone, even with the materials, the learning materials. We try to do it as a Department, because in that Department we are very few.

Related to this discourse of ownership is another privileging expertise of the health professionals working in the field:

We have content of what is supposed to be covered. We've got those people who are specialising in specific areas sometimes they will say this person can fit in this, this one if maybe can go to research, is more good in it, I can say at departmental level we've got a very good opportunity to discuss such things.

Similarly,

And even when can I, in terms of the timetable, where, who will be using which class, ja. And even using the expertise of a specific person If I'm doing like If there's a component where I'm having that expertise, they do involve me in that aspect.

The idea that this expertise involves understanding the needs of communities the School seeks to serve and that this knowledge then needs to inform curriculum development then appears:

I think that is the main decision that we know the needs of the communities that we are serving.

What would appear to be the case, therefore, is that academics working in the School, who are all health professionals, draw on their professional knowledge and on the role of that knowledge in rural areas, such as the one in which The University of Venda is located, to 'claim' ownership of the curriculum. This can then be seen to be conducive to the emergence of events, such as curriculum planning and review, related to the assurance of quality. However, the presence of conditions, for example, such as confusion around definitions of quality noted earlier in this chapter, inevitably impact on the way individuals are able to exercise their own personal emergent powers and properties in relation to these events.

6.2.2.2 Professional bodies

As I have indicated earlier in this chapter, a discourse of compliance with external regulatory bodies is evident in policy documents at The University of Venda. The professional status of those working in the School means that they have long been familiar with the requirements of statutory bodies governing entrance to and performance in the profession. These bodies include the Health Professions Council of South Africa and the Nursing Council. Health professionals need to register with the relevant Council before they can practise legally and, because of this, Councils are involved in the regulation of education. This involvement includes the development of

Education and Training Standards.

The Nursing Council, for example, claims its right to do this with the following statement:

The SANC shall, by administrative rules and regulation, set standards for the establishment and outcomes of nursing education and training programmes, including clinical learning programmes, and approve such programmes that meet the requirements of the Nursing Act (No. 33 of 2005) (South African Nursing Council, n.d).

These standards are written in outcomes-based format and, in the case of the nursing standards at least, include criteria for the programme's training nurses as well as for the standards expected of nurses themselves. Thus, Standards 1.1.1 and 1.1.2 for nurses appear as follows:

Standards	Criteria	Sources of Evidence
1.1.1. Graduates adhere to professional values, norms and standards	Duration & structure of course facilitates achievement of competencies	Course book with details of course Copy of full course outline
1.1.2. Graduates reflect established competencies in nursing and midwifery practice	Total clinical practice hours are adequate for graduates to achieve competency Clinical practice learning commences from the first year of training Theory precedes practice Practical hours are not less than 60% of the total duration of course Minimum of 8 weeks	Curriculum map/ grid Description of clinical experience Outline of the total clinical experience Duration and location of placements

Standards	Criteria	Sources of Evidence
	uninterrupted practica at end of course to allow for transition into workplace.	

Table 1: Nursing Education and Training Standards (South African Nursing Council, n.d.)

The Nursing Act (Republic of South Africa, 2005) gives provision for the Council to i) conduct examinations, ii) conduct inspections of training institutions and nursing education programmes, iii) withdraw or suspend a programme not meeting its requirements, iv) accredit institutions training nurses, and v) accredit training programmes. As a statutory body, the Nursing Council therefore (along with other relevant bodies) enjoys considerable power, which it exercises in site visits for purposes of review and accreditation along with other activities.

The health professionals employed in the School clearly accept this regulation, as the following response to a question on the meaning of quality shows:

[Quality] has to do on maintaining or upholding a specific standard of a particular issue in this case teaching and learning. How the standard in which you teach and the environment within which you teach and including the product that comes off that programme goes together with what type of quality or what type of product are you producing. And how what are the level at which you teach is acceptable and it's done properly using the correct process and these process must be uniform and acceptable and must match the standard for that type of learning even in other institutions then we say there is

While this particular participant was willing to comply with regulation, she was, nonetheless, critical of the way quality assurance was exercised by the statutory body:

I think they are just concentrating on . . . quality of teaching and learning maybe . . . especially examinations (okay) not Not Not. The other aspects of how people are teaching . . . are they following curriculum . . . how do . . . because you need to . . . to . . . To know even when a person add something into the curriculum or remove something from whatever if she feels this thing should not be taught and so on.

It would appear therefore that this particular participant's experience of quality assurance by the statutory body was of checking assessment in examinations and not in reviewing the actual delivery of the curriculum that was guided by the published standards.

Nonetheless, what is significant in my exploration of conditions enabling the implementation of policies and procedures related to quality assurance at The University of Venda is the existence of an item related to the need to regulate quality in what Archer (1996: 105) terms the 'propositional register' of a society. In this case, the idea that quality should be assured exists in that register and then emerges in discourses drawn upon by the professionals teaching in the School. The existence of this proposition in the cultural register of professionals teaching in the School meant that the introduction of quality assurance at The University of Venda was experienced as 'complementary' rather than 'contradictory'.

In spite of this, there is evidence in the interviews that it is a discourse of compliance that drives adherence to quality assurance in the School rather than a personal belief system. One participant, for example, noted that:

What I'm not sure, it's whether we believe as individuals that quality is important, or we are following because we see it as something imposed to us.

Archer's (1996) work on agency claims that individuals exercise their personal emergent powers and properties in the domains of culture and structure to effect emergence of events at the level of the Actual and experiences and observations at the level of the Empirical. In the case of the School of Health Sciences, individuals are confronted with

a range of structures and cultural mechanisms (discourses) related to quality. They exercise their agency by drawing on some of these and not others. This could mean that the structure of the statutory Councils is drawn on to effect some kind of emergence but, at the same time, what actually emerges is impacted by other discourses and structures in the context. This would then mean that the implementation of policies and procedures is compromised by, for example, conditions related to overwork or discourses around what actually constitutes quality. While the existence of statutory bodies can be seen as an enabling condition, this existence does not alone guarantee the emergence of quality related practices.

6.2.2.3 Professional teaching

As I have indicated earlier in this chapter, The University of Venda has placed enormous emphasis on the development of academic staff as professional educators in higher education, drawing on expertise in another South African university to support the institution in doing this. At the same time, of relevance to the School of Health Sciences, is what might be termed a 'discourse of health education' in the health-related areas. Medical education has long been the focus of specialist attention from those involved in providing it, evidenced in the existence of professional organisations promoting the quality of educational practice in the health professions. Specialist conferences on health education exist alongside journals and other means of promoting and extending expertise.

The existence of structures and mechanisms enabling good practice in health education is discernible in comments made by participants in the interviews. When asked about teaching and assessment, for example, one participant noted that:

Good assessment does indicate that, yes, we do the formative and the summative. But with, if it's good it should assess those objectives that we were given, i.e. our outcomes. It should focus on the outcomes, unlike if it's focusing on what I feel should be done, as a teacher.

This extract is redolent with discourses common in the scholarship of teaching and learning. For example, the distinction between formative assessment, intended to

develop learning, and summative assessment, intended to measure the outcomes of learning, is prevalent in the literature (see, for example, Luckett and Sutherland, 2000). In addition, it draws on discourses related to outcomes-based education also prevalent in the literature (see, for example, Spady, 1994). The extract is also indicative of a discourse promoting the need for validity ('It should focus on the outcomes, unlike if it's focusing on what I feel should be done as a teacher'), usually taught as achievable through the alignment of outcomes and assessment criteria in formal training programmes.

Another participant in the study also drew on ideas about assessment prevalent in the scholarly literature on teaching in higher education in the following way:

. . . assessment should be scaled at different levels. You can have assessment within the class after whatever you have done. Student can assess peer assessments of how they have they brought back maybe they report. You can even assess them yourself even in class . . . oral assessment.

Here, the participant is drawing on the idea that assessment needs to be ongoing and that it can take place in relatively informal ways, for example through the use of oral assessment in class.

The presence of discourses demonstrating ideas related to 'professional teaching' alongside the existence of professional councils, which often require their members to earn 'professional development points' to maintain registration, can be seen to be enabling of the implementation of quality assurance policies and procedures in the School of Health Sciences. Once again, however, these structures and mechanisms exist alongside others which are not enabling and these constrain the extent to which quality-related practices can emerge.

6.3 The School of Human and Social Sciences

6.3.1 Constraining conditions

6.3.1.1 Multiple meanings of quality

As in the School of Health Sciences, participants in my study from the School of Human and Social Sciences demonstrated discursively-constituted understandings of quality. In addition, participants confused definitions of quality with quality-related practices. Consider, for example, the following response from one staff member when asked about how quality could be defined:

[I] am not so sure that the school has a definition per se (the department) even the department itself I haven't seen anything written down saying this quality or these are the standards that we observe. The standards that . . . observe are mostly those that are set by the University itself, you know like for instance the issue of moderating papers. We know that that has come from not from within the school but it has come from it's a university policy that requires that we moderate and there is an insistence.

Here, the inability to provide a definition of the meaning of quality (i.e. a definition related to 'fitness for purpose') means that the discussion slips into practices, that is, the moderation of papers, which is perceived to be a requirement set by the University. Without a definition of 'fitness for purpose', the chances of that moderation ensuring that learning outcomes, assessment criteria and the tasks designed to allow students the opportunity to demonstrate that they have met those criteria is arguably limited. Although moderation takes place, the extent to which it contributes to the attainment of quality then becomes questionable.

The following extract from an interview with another participant again attests to confused understandings of quality:

With quality what was introduced more especially by our Dean would be internal moderation of papers that he needs reports. That is just wonderful according to me. We can benchmark, we can approach it with remedial kind of approach to those who are stuck. He encourages success rate and throughput and a well

calculated kind of let me say assessment method should be from within and follow policies that one really instructs on quality, that we moderate our papers, that we go for workshop.

In this extract, we see a senior member of the School calling for 'reports' on moderation. The Policy on Assessment calls for moderators to prepare a report on their work. Without an understanding of the principle of alignment between outcomes, criteria and tasks noted above, the extent to which those reports will actually describe competent moderation, and thus contribute to quality, is open to question.

This participant also notes the Dean's call for attention to success and throughput rates. I have already noted the performance-based funding formula introduced to South African higher education in 2004 (Ministry of Education, 2004). This formula rewards efficient 'throughput' in the form of the completion of a qualification in minimum time. Given the nature of the student body at The University of Venda, student performance data tends to be very weak, with the result that the University is penalised for poor success and graduation rates in the subsidy it receives⁸. One result of the introduction of the funding formula has been the development of a 'discourse of efficiency' in South African higher education as those responsible for managing teaching and learning (that is Deputy Vice Chancellors Teaching and Learning, Deans Teaching and Learning and so on) try to maximise the subsidy earned by the University. Here the 'discourse of efficiency' is drawn upon in relation to quality. While there are, of course, links between good success, throughput and graduation rates and a programme which is fit for purpose, those links are not direct and it would be perfectly possible, for example, to improve student performance data simply by lowering assessment standards. Once again, therefore we see a slippage in understandings of quality and, perhaps more significantly, a slippage between understanding and practice.

Yet another respondent replies to a question about definitions of quality by saying:

⁸ The university would, however, receive a Teaching Development Grant calculated on performance data to assist improvement in this area.

So that for me is for teaching, and quality within education, that it should, you should be able to offer services or products which would withstand scrutiny from wherever.

This definition draws strongly on an 'oversight discourse', which arguably accords with discourses of compliance noted elsewhere in this chapter and also in Chapter Five. This discourse of compliance is confirmed by the following comment in which the participant notes information which should be given to students:

You are just told you should know at the first lecture title, this date, and this when I was supposed to submit my first test, my assignment. My first test is going to be on this, and this is the date on which semester marks are going to be displayed. And I believe that is what you guys in Quality Assurance are really interested in!

While information provided to students undoubtedly contributes to the attainment of quality in the sense of a programme being 'fit for purpose', this understanding simply constructs quality as compliance to an external authority. The presence of dominant discourses of compliance in the School environment arguably contributes to individuals not exercising their personal emergent powers and properties in the pursuit of quality in the way intended by the policies on quality assurance.

Finally, one member of staff notes the lack of any form of discussion on meanings of quality in the School with the comment that:

If you want a uniform answer I have none because there was no such discussion.
So I cannot give you an answer, do you understand it now?

This lack of discussion would not be conducive to the emergence of groups of corporate agents within the school who are focused on concern with quality and who would then identify projects to pursue this concern.

It would appear, therefore, that the cultural system in the School (and arguably in the University more widely) is not strong enough to exert causal influences that could unify the varying cultural beliefs, values, norms and ideas related to quality. Without such

complementarity, the emergence of practices related to quality assurance is arguably compromised.

6.3.1.2 Responsibility and accountability

In my attempt to understand interaction between T_2 and T_3 , in an interview I asked a head of department in the School whether the involvement of academics in departmental and School affairs was sufficient. He provided a neutral answer:

I'll say this - yes and no. Yes and no in the sense that once all these issues come up, as head of department, I mean I attend meetings maybe an Executive Board or a School Board, the lecturers also attend School Board, then this, as I said before, say what they want to say. So yes and no, CHETL will also call for workshops or sometimes documents. The thing is that . . . is that people don't seem to be bothered. Because it's always like, that policy there is no responsibility so why bother? It's only when it affects me directly.

The head of department's response to my question is important because of his identification of the 'Why bother?' discourse. As he points out, staff members will attend meetings of the School Board and, sometimes, workshops organised by the Centre for Higher Education Teaching and Learning but they do not seem to appreciate they have responsibility for quality unless events affect them directly.

Arguably, one of the reasons for the failure on the part of staff to appreciate that they have responsibility for matters related to quality is the way the institutional policies were developed. As I have indicated earlier in this chapter, the policies were developed by the Director of the Quality Unit as the Higher Educational Committee's institutional audit approached. That policies were hurriedly developed can partly be attributable to the institutional instability which had immediately preceded the installation of the current Vice Chancellor. This point is taken up by one participant, who notes:

The only decisions that I know we get involved in are at School Board level and then, by then, when issues come to us policies have been made. We [are] simply supposed to look at them and say whether we agree or not. But still one doubts if we disagree whether our decisions will be taken into consideration Yes I know that the department will say they have someone who represents quality

assurance issues. The School will also say there is a committee for quality assurance but I wonder how active that committee is because I haven't interacted with any of them.

It would appear therefore that policies and structures for quality assurance were established but that the investment of academics in those structures was not developed at the time they were created. It is here that the discourse of compliance I identified as conditioning the University at T₁ comes into play. From apartheid times, academics at The University of Venda have long been conditioned into accepting decisions imposed from above. Attendance at university structures such as the School Board (and even the Senate) then becomes a matter of simple compliance. Once the 'act' of compliance has been performed, then responsibility for further involvement is avoided.

For many academics, it would seem that much of what is 'imposed' from above is seen to be irrelevant to their daily lives. The following participant, who is also a head of department, notes that:

. . . like I do myself all my meetings. I involved them, even prepared them for the very strategic objectives. Even our bosberaad⁹ involved them even though they were saying this is irrelevant.

It could well be the case, therefore, that some of the structural and cultural conditions identified in Chapter Five, and which include the characteristics of the student body, the lack of infrastructure and so on, impinge on daily activities to such an extent that they simply become a matter of survival. The ability to attend to 'higher order' matters such as strategic planning and even quality assurance are then constructed as 'irrelevant'. Of more importance are the practical measures simply needed to survive a day's work.

As I have indicated earlier in this chapter, Boughey and McKenna (2011a) identify a 'discourse of despondency' in historically black universities in South Africa. This discourse denies an improved future in institutional functioning and allows academics to simply accept, and survive, the status quo without making any effort to draw on the

⁹ 'Bosberaad' is an Afrikaans term in frequent usage in South Africa. It denotes a meeting in an isolated location (bos/bush) to break political deadlock.

initiatives developed by institutional leadership structures to enhance matters. I would argue that it is this that the participant above is referring to. In the School, therefore, there would appear to be a set of conditions relating to responsibility and accountability which constrain involvement in matters related to quality assurance.

6.3.1.3 Multiple understandings of ‘good’ teaching’

As in the School of Health Sciences, multiple responses to questions about what it means to teach well are evident in the interviews with participants from the School of Human and Social Sciences. Dominant, however, is a discursively-constructed understanding of ‘good’ teaching as compliance. When asked how good teaching or assessment could be described, for example, one response was as follows:

An assessment which regards first of all the guidelines which are described by the National Department in order to arrive where we are expected. Secondly, each and everyone, from what I read from evaluation of the students it becomes a tool, a very strong tool. Because no one there, it is not an HoD who bites you to the dean, you are alone. Students say you are late, you are what. Some of the problems that I have, late comers, those who don’t want to come on board.

This response is interesting for a number of reasons. In the first place, the participant cites ‘guidelines which are described by the National Department’ in relation to assessment. Public universities in South Africa are established by statute and, as such, are guaranteed autonomy in academic matters. The Department of Higher Education and Training does not develop curricula for the universities and does not involve itself in assessment. This is not the case for the general education and training sector, where the Department of Basic Education provides a curriculum that incorporates assessment. The participant cited above clearly fails to understand the independence of the University from the ‘National Department’ and thus his own role and responsibilities in developing curricula and associated assessment practices. This would then impact on his understanding of the need to assure quality. The participant also draws on the practice of eliciting feedback from students as a means of assuring quality. In his case, student feedback is seen to have empowered students to the extent that academics may need to account for themselves in the wake of ‘complaints’ to the Dean. This then

means that the academic cannot deal with recalcitrant behaviour on the part of students themselves, and also that 'good' teaching can mean 'teaching which pleases students', where that teaching involves calling on students to make minimum effort.

Ironically, this sort of view of 'good' teaching can be seen to arise from the enforcement of policies and procedures related to quality assurance. The University of Venda has a policy on the Monitoring of Teaching and Learning which requires academics to elicit student feedback. What appears to be the case, however, is that, in the absence of an overall and shared understanding of i) what quality in higher education is and ii) how quality can be assured and promoted, individuals fall back on practices and cite these as 'quality'.

6.3.1.4 Resistance

At several points in this chapter, I have pointed to the hasty development of policies on teaching and learning in the face of the impending institutional audit by the Higher Educational Quality Committee. At times, it was my observation that the person developing these policies was working to such deadlines that he would cut and paste from the policies of institutions against which he was trying to benchmark, with the result that the name of the other university would appear in the draft policy. The policies were not developed, therefore, in a way which took cognisance of the context and history of The University of Venda. Rather, there was an attempt to capture 'best practice', practice which might be possible at another institution but which was constrained by conditions at a historically black university. In addition, the policies were not developed with the mission and vision of the University in mind.

Boughey (2011) argues for institutional difference to be taken into account when 'crafting' teaching and learning. In this way, teaching and learning become 'fit for purpose' for the particular institutional type and the institutional vision and mission statements. The stated mission of The University of Venda is:

To be at the centre of tertiary education for rural and regional development in Southern Africa.

The idea of a university being at 'the centre for rural and regional development' has particular implications for teaching and learning. One implication would be the inclusion of service learning in all programmes, where service learning is understood to involve students taking their learning into communities in order to provide a service while, at the same time, learning from those communities. This learning from the community can simply involve the enrichment of theoretically-informed understandings. Alternatively, it can involve actual challenges to those understandings. Bringle and Hatcher (1995: 112) define service learning in the following way:

Service-Learning is a credit bearing, educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility.

Nowhere, however, does the Policy on Teaching and Learning mention service learning. Rather, teaching is constructed as generic 'best practice', an observation that is ironic given that the Policy on Teaching and Learning begins by stating that:

The purpose of this policy is to ensure that the manner in which teaching and learning are carried out at The University of Venda supports the vision and mission of the University.

Earlier in this chapter, I pointed to problems with 'student-centred' approaches to learning amongst learner communities where learners do not bring the social and cultural capital to allow them to direct their own learning. This is but one more instance where the policy does not take into account local context and conditions.

As I have also indicated earlier in this chapter, the process of policy development was also not marked by involvement from other staff. Policies were developed and, given the spirit of compliance characterising institutional structures as well as the discourse of 'Why bother?' noted above, were 'rubber-stamped' all the way up to Senate.

Given the process of developing policies on teaching and learning, an academic 'on the ground' might construe them as so far removed from local realities, as well as from the

identity the University is seeking to achieve for itself, that the options are to ignore them and draw on established practices:

I believe you cannot toe the line the same way, Mine is to see what best is possible to use in my class. I believe that I know my class better than anyone else. You might find out that the University is saying do this, but it doesn't work out that way.

Similarly,

I use this thing in class and it works for me I have been working with this all the time and it worked.

And,

It's only me who knows what is happening there, they don't know why is failure rate like this, why is this thing like this you know.

As analyses of enrolments in higher education show (see, for example, Cooper and Subotzky, 2001; Scott et al., 2007), the humanities and social sciences have borne the brunt of enrolments of black students since the early 1990s when higher education opened up in the wake of the shift to democracy. Poor teaching of mathematics and science at school level mean that enrolment in the humanities and social sciences is the only option for poor black students who cannot access the natural sciences or commerce because of their grades, particularly in mathematics, in the school leaving examinations. At the same time, it is the humanities and social sciences which place the greatest demand on students in terms of academic literacies.

It could be the case, therefore, that responses from academics in the School of Human and Social Sciences, such as those above, constitute a 'from the chalk face' reaction to the new procedures identified in the teaching and learning policies. Structural constraints such as poor infrastructure and the staff–student ratio, as well as the very nature of the student body, mean that academics feel they have worked out a method of survival and, in the context of this, will ignore or resist the policy requirements.

However, as a senior member of the School points out in the extract below, resistance can also be attributed to the failure to involve academics in the development of the policies in the first place:

I think they are brilliant policies but I always get the feeling that lecturers generally want to resist because, as I was telling you, in the past The University of Venda maybe this policies but they were not in the public domain they were not there for people's consumption. Now lecturers are getting these policies given to them and they are being told that you observe these policies. There is so much resistance you talk about course outline people come up in arms.

While overt resistance may be evident, it is also possible that policies and procedures are simply, in Archerian (1995: 233 and 1996: 159) terms, 'syncretised', meaning that the propositions contradictory to current practices contained in the policies are incorporated into dominant propositions even though the contradiction continues to exist. So, for example, claims about the adoption of quality assurance practices, such as that illustrated below, may in fact only mask the syncretisation of procedures outlined in the policies with existing constructions of 'quality' teaching:

In my department having so many other means of heading towards quality assurance like methods of teaching, like what routes we are using in teaching, assessment methods and even upgrading ourselves in the first place. I think quality assurance becomes something accepted positively in our department.

As I pointed out in my analysis of conditions in the School of Health Sciences, therefore, the policies on teaching and learning cannot be seen as an enabling of the emergence of practices associated with quality or the assurance of quality because of the interplay between their structural emergent powers and properties and other powers and properties active in the domains of culture and structure.

6.3.2 Enabling conditions

6.3.2.1 Transformation

One of the facets of the definition of quality adopted by the Higher Educational Quality Committee (South African Council on Higher Education, 2001) is 'transformation' where the term is defined as:

. . . developing the capabilities of individual learners for personal enrichment, as well as the requirements of social development and economic and employment growth.

This definition can be seen to draw on the White Paper on Higher Education (Ministry of Education 1997: Section 1.1), where one of the purposes of higher education is stated as:

To meet the learning needs and aspirations of individuals through the development of their intellectual abilities and aptitudes throughout their lives. Higher education equips individuals to make the best use of their talents and of the opportunities offered by society for self-fulfilment. It is thus a key allocator of life chances and an important vehicle for achieving equity in the distribution of opportunity and achievement among South African citizens.

Although understandings of higher education as transformative of individuals were not dominant in the School of Human and Social Sciences, they were apparent. One academic, for example, defines 'good' teaching as:

. . . the change that I have brought into that human being, the discipline that I brought to that human being, the type of, the shaping of that person, the character itself, the way in which that person is thinking not about saying you have to attain the score of eighty or seventy-five. No, the type of person that I'm dealing with, respect, values, trying also to respect someone else.

Gee (2008: 156) uses the term 'Discourse' (deliberately capitalised) to indicate:

Distinctive ways of speaking/listening and often, too, writing/reading coupled with distinctive ways of acting, interacting, valuing, feeling, dressing, believing, with other people and with various objects, tools and technologies, so as to enact specific socially recognizable identities engaged in specific socially recognizable activities (original emphasis).

Gee (ibid.) distinguishes between primary and secondary Discourses, where primary Discourses 'come for free' as a result of our initial socialisation in our homes of origin. Secondary Discourses are then acquired through exposure to other social contexts. Boughey (2000) calls on Gee's construct of Discourse to describe the experiences of students in a historically black rural university similar to The University of Venda. Her account identifies a 'Discourse clash' between the academic Discourses of the staff and those that working class black students bring with them into the academy.

The sort of personal transformation identified by the academic from the School of Human and Social Sciences in the interview extract above can be associated with the construct of Discourse. For the academic concerned, her role is to support acquisition of a secondary Discourse, a Discourse that will value the kind of academic learning she herself values and not only the attainment of marks.

While this was the only instance of a definition of 'good' teaching as involving personal transformation in the data set, in Archerian terms it can be seen to exist in the propositional register of the School. The extent to which this could be fostered in order to enable the emergence of quality-related practices in teaching and learning which will lead to this transformation is, however, open to question given the presence of other constraining mechanisms.

6.3.2.2 Acceptance and development

In spite of the caveats expressed in Section 6.3.1.4 above regarding the way quality assurance policies are ignored or resisted, some participants from the School were quite clear in stating that things had changed, that people were more aware of the need for quality and quality-related policies and procedures. Consider, for example,

Over the 9 years or almost 10 years that I have been here, I have seen changes in the quality . . . people becoming more, you know, quality conscience in terms of exams in terms of classroom practice. You know things have changed."

A head of department then states:

Well you see quality, my understanding that quality is a, quality assurance is important in every, how do you call it, sphere of life, but in regard to Higher Education it is very crucial.

Many individuals from the School have registered for professional development courses intended to enhance their performance as educators in higher education. While it could be argued that participation in professional development courses occurs in response to a strong discourse citing the need to recognise and reward teaching in the Teaching and Learning Policy, and is also associated with structures such as the Department of Higher Education and Training's Teaching Development Grants, participation requires commitment and takes time. The achievement of a certificate of competence as an Assessor in Higher Education or a Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Education is no small matter. The fact that professional development exists and that some academics choose to exercise their personal emergent powers and properties to draw on these opportunities can only be seen as, ultimately, conducive to enhanced teaching and learning at the institution.

6.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have attempted to identify the conditions enabling and constraining the implementation of policies and procedures related to quality assurance in two schools at The University of Venda, the School of Health Sciences and the School of Human and Social Sciences. My analysis has been on the basis of in-depth interviews conducted with a range of academics from across the Schools.

Porpora (2013: 29) notes that any attempt to understand social change morphogenetically should involve an understanding of the dialectical relationship between human agency and the contexts in which those agents find themselves. My analysis of the social change involved in introducing policies and procedures related to quality assurance in two Schools at The University of Venda attempts to do just that. I have shown how academics exercise their personal emergent powers and properties in relation to structures and mechanisms existing in the domains of culture and structure at the level of the Real in order to effect the emergence of practices (conceptualised as events) at the level of the Actual and experiences and observations at the level of the

Empirical. These structures and mechanisms are understood to possess structural emergent powers and properties and cultural emergent powers and properties, which are activated through the exercise of agency. Thus, a policy cannot exercise tendential causal influences unless its structural emergent properties are exercised by an agent drawing on it. Similarly, the cultural emergent powers and properties of a discourse are inactive until an agent chooses to draw on that discourse. As always in critical realist research, the interplay of agency with these structures and mechanisms is the focus of analysis – interplay which can be varied and boundless. Also significant is the idea that interplay at the level of the Real is only tendential and not strictly causative.

My analysis has revealed an array of conditions enabling and constraining the implementation of quality assurance procedures and properties. In the next and final chapter of this thesis, I attempt to arrive at more overarching conclusions as to what this means for The University of Venda.

CHAPTER SEVEN: T₄ – A BEGINNING AND AN END

7.1 Introduction

My research question for this study was, *‘What constrains and enables practices related to requirements for quality assurance in teaching and learning and experiences of this quality at a small comprehensive, historically disadvantaged university in South Africa?’*

As I explained in Chapter One, my interest in this question arose following the introduction of quality assurance at The University of Venda in the face of the institutional audit about to be conducted by the Higher Education Quality Committee, the body responsible for quality assurance in higher education in South Africa.

Although quality assurance was introduced, I could see little evidence of the policies and procedures that had been developed being implemented in spite of, what seemed to me, the urgent need to do so. As I have indicated at several points in this thesis, The University of Venda attracts poor, black, working class students predominantly from rural areas who are generally considered to be ‘underprepared’ for tertiary study. Their journey to a degree is therefore likely to be more arduous than that of their more advantaged peers and this has obvious implications for the quality of the teaching and learning experiences made available to them. Yet, as I have also pointed out, research (see, for example, Scott et al., 2007) shows that it is students such as those at The University of Venda who continue to bear the brunt of the poor performance of the South African higher education system. For me, then, the need to improve the quality of teaching and learning at The University of Venda was imperative, yet the introduction of quality assurance appeared to have done little to further this end.

In order to develop my research question, I drew on Archer’s (1995, 1996, 2000) social realism and Bhaskar’s (1978, 1986) critical realism. As I explain in Chapter Two of this thesis, the layered ontology of critical realism allowed me to posit a series of structures and mechanisms at the level of the Real, the interplay of which would lead to the emergence of events related to the implementation of quality assurance policies and procedures at the level of the Actual, and experiences and observations of these at the level of the Empirical. My role as a researcher in the critical realist tradition was to

identify and explore these structures and mechanisms. The use of Archer's social realism then allowed me to investigate that interplay in more detail.

More particularly, Archer's work allowed me to see the interplay between 'the people' (that is, human agents) and 'the parts' (structure and culture) over time, thanks to the construct of analytical dualism (Archer, 2004), which requires the temporal separation of these for analytical purposes only. Her morphogenetic framework (Archer, 1995) then allowed me to look at whether change (morphogenesis) or non-change (morphostasis) had taken place over time. In using the morphogenetic framework, I conceptualised change in relation to the implementation of quality assurance practices and procedures. My search for change was intended to interrogate my own observation that change had not taken place – that quality assurance policies and procedures were not being implemented.

As I point out in Chapter Two, the framework posits three time periods: T_1 , T_2 – T_3 and T_4 . T_1 in my study is conceptualised as the period immediately preceding the introduction of quality assurance to The University of Venda. In Archer's (1995) terms, T_1 represents a period when agents are conditioned into acting as they do. T_2 – T_3 in my study then represents the period when agents began to interact with the new structures (in this case the policies and procedures and the new directorate established to manage quality) related to quality assurance and the ideas and concepts associated with this. T_4 , the end of the morphogenetic cycle (and the beginning of a new one), is then the period when it is possible to identify which changes, if any have taken place. These changes, if any, would then be incorporated into the conditioning at the beginning of a new cycle.

More specifically, the use of Archer's work allowed me to see 'whose conceptual shifts are responsible for *which* structural changes, *when*, *where* and under *what* conditions' (Archer, 1998: 361, original emphasis).

7.2 Conceptual shifts and structural changes

Chapter Three of the thesis begins to answer the question ‘*Whose* conceptual shifts are responsible for *which* structural changes?’ with an analysis of the structural and cultural conditions in place at the time quality assurance was introduced at The University of Venda. In that chapter, I explore the impetus for the introduction of quality assurance in developments such as globalisation, the ‘massification’ of higher education systems associated with it and the resultant lack of trust in higher education standards in popular discourses which accompanied increased access to what had been elite systems. In the South African context, I note the need for a disparate and unequal higher education system to be made fit to serve all South Africans regardless of social group. Conceptual shifts such as these were argued to have promoted the ‘structural change’ of the introduction of quality assurance at national level and, thus, at institutional level at The University of Venda. To all intents and purposes, although some of these conceptual shifts may have been shared by individuals working at the University, they were not of their making. In relation to these shifts, individuals working at the University can be conceptualised as a group of primary agents ‘sharing the same life chances’ (Archer, 2000: 263). With the exception of a few social actors who may have been involved in policy making at a national level, essentially, the shifts ‘happened’ to the majority of academics at the University, who then had to operate, following Archer (1996: xxv) in a ‘world’ not of their own making.

The introduction of quality assurance arguably constituted a jarring set of contradictions in the cultural system at The University of Venda. Academics had long been accustomed not only to defining quality for themselves but also to determining quality through a set of contextually embedded practices. The status of the University as a historically black university under apartheid, alongside its relative isolation thanks to its geographical location in a rural area, then arguably impacted on the ‘bedding down’ of beliefs and practices related to quality in the institution. New discourses introduced into the cultural system not only called for very specific definitions of quality, focusing on

‘fitness for purpose’ but also on the emergence of a set of practices associated with this definition.

These new quality-related discourses were thus inserted into an environment that had the potential to be hostile to them. The response of staff was then either to completely ignore policies and procedures or to continue working as normal while, at the same time, acknowledging quality assurance as a ‘good thing’.

It is possible to identify other contradictions at T1. The introduction of a new performance-based funding formula for public higher education in 2004 (Ministry of Education, 2004), for example, can be seen to be attributable to ‘economic efficiency’ discourses at global and international levels, which attributed economic performance to the production of ‘knowledge workers’ by the universities. This, along with the accountability discourses of New Public Management (see Section 3.2.2), then resulted in the ‘funding for performance’ of the new formula.

However, dominant conditions at The University of Venda do not favour ‘performance’. As I point out in Chapter Five, the history of the University as an apartheid institution is not conducive to the research production that is heavily favoured in the new funding formula. Staff members are, however, enjoined to produce research, in dominant discourses promoted by management, following the introduction of the formula. The location of the University in a deeply rural area is, in addition, not conducive to attracting highly research-active individuals, who are more likely to encounter conditions conducive to their research interests in more favourably resourced universities in large urban areas. In addition, the nature of the student body, which comprises poor, black working class individuals from mainly rural backgrounds, also does not favour ‘performance’ in terms of teaching outputs. Success, throughput and graduation rates are impacted by the kind of students the University enrolls and, as a result, funding is

reduced. The need to deal with large numbers of 'underprepared' students in a context which lacks infrastructure and support, as many academics noted in the interviews reported in Chapter Six, then militates further against the production of research.

Ideas resulting from the introduction of the new funding formula, in the form of efficiency discourses exerting pressure on staff members to 'perform' in order to increase both research and teaching outputs, can then be seen to be in opposition to dominant discourses which had allowed academics a great deal of freedom to make what they could of the prevailing conditions. The response of staff could then be either to completely ignore policies and procedures intended to increase teaching outputs (i.e. the policies related to the quality assurance of teaching and learning) or to continue working as normal while, at the same time, acknowledging quality assurance as a 'good thing'.

The disjuncture between the construction of students as autonomous, independent learners in The Policy on Teaching and Learning (University of Venda, 2009) and other constructions of them as 'underprepared' for higher education in other documents and in popular discourse more generally constitutes yet another set of oppositional ideas. In Archer's terms, the construction of students as 'underprepared' constitutes an environment into which a new set of ideas constructing students as autonomous, independent learners able to manage their own learning with only a 'light touch' from lecturers is inserted by the policy makers. The response of staff to these new ideas could then be to ignore the policy and to continue working as normal in overwhelmingly difficult circumstances.

To a large extent, therefore, the answer to the question '*Whose* conceptual shifts are responsible for *which* structural changes?' began to provide me with a response to my questions about why quality assurance policies and procedures were not being

implemented. The conceptual shifts occurred outside the environment of The University of Venda, an environment that had been largely isolated because of apartheid. Those conceptual shifts then resulted in structural changes (the development of policies and procedures) which prevailing conditions made difficult to implement.

The second part of Archer's question posed at the end of Section 7.1 above, '*When, where* and under *what* conditions?' allows me to pursue my interest in my observation that quality assurance policies and procedures were not being implemented in more detail. The question 'Under what conditions?' inevitably brings attention to the status of The University of Venda as a historically black institution and the poor legacy of infrastructure this has left. In interviews with members of staff from both Schools in my study, frequent mention was made of the lack of venues, the poor quality of teaching spaces when they were available and overcrowding in them. One staff member, for example, had this to say:

If now you going to have go into a classroom that has no facility for a data projector, you are expected to carry your own data projector. At times the plugs in the room are not working . . . Aahh! (*expression of pain*) you abandon your Powerpoint, you have to go to notes. I don't think for me that's a main worry . . . [but] it limits what one can do, you know. And to make matters worse you know Venda is very hot you need air cons in this classrooms whether you like it or not. But some of them don't even work. You go in the there and the students are just concentrating on trying to keep cool. You know you yourself can barely stand it. And you need to administer whatever needs to be administered but you are expected to do so you see.

Descriptions such as this one, noting the lack of equipment such as data projectors in teaching venues, the lack of working electrical points, and the lack of air conditioning, attest to the material conditions under which staff members work. Conditions such as these must impact on individuals' understandings of quality in teaching and learning,

since 'quality' could simply come to mean having a cool venue with sufficient seats for students and a working electrical connection. Policies on teaching and learning at the University, however, offer much more sophisticated constructions of quality, as I note in Chapter Six. The disjuncture between the material conditions and the possibility of academic teachers acting as 'facilitators' of independent, autonomous students' learning is enormous and must impact on possibilities. The question, therefore, of 'Under what conditions' change is possible elicits scepticism regarding the material conditions at The University of Venda.

Alongside these material conditions, staff members noted other working conditions related to the lack of administrative support and understaffing in departments. As I note in Chapter Six, the possibility of change in respect of 'quality' emerging, given demands on academic teachers, must be viewed with some suspicion. Archer notes (1995) that structural change often precedes changes in the domain of culture, a point taken up by Boughey and McKenna (in press) in their analysis of the introduction of quality assurance in the South African system. To some extent, this is also true of The University of Venda. As my analysis in Chapter Six indicates, quality assurance was introduced as a structure in advance of the discursive constructions of quality itself that needed to accompany it. There was then a failure to embed an understanding of quality as 'fitness for purpose' at institutional level. This failure subsequently resulted in multiple, and often contesting, constructions of quality amongst academic staff members. Some of these understandings of quality required changes in the material conditions at the University that did not occur at the same time as the introduction of quality assurance. The interplay of structure and culture identified here is clearly complex but, suffice to say, the failure to make structural changes related to infrastructure and workload appear to have impacted on possibilities for change.

In some respects, Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs can be seen to be pertinent here. Maslow posits five levels of need leading to the 'self actualisation' that refers to the

attainment of full potential. At the bottom of this hierarchy are physiological needs. To all intents and purposes, the inability of The University of Venda to allow for academic teachers' physiological needs to be met through the provision of adequate teaching spaces and of support for their teaching can be seen to impact on their ability to rise through the levels and reach the 'self actualisation' of being 'quality' teachers.

A similar situation appears to be the case with respect to the governance of the University. As quality assurance was introduced, so too were governance structures related to its implementation. Engagement around issues related to the quality of teaching and learning in those structures appears to have been limited, however; an observation arguably conditioned by the authoritarian culture of management inherited from apartheid. The observation on the part of the Higher Education Quality Committee regarding participation in the Senate of the University is noted in Chapter Five of this thesis alongside another observation, drawn from perusal of minutes of Senate Committees, of a similar lack of participation in these fora. Structural change was not accompanied by cultural change, prompting staff members to understand themselves as active members of an academic community with roles and responsibilities in its governance. To all intents and purposes, therefore, the structures intended to promote the assurance of quality are not functioning in that, in Archerian terms, academics are not using their personal emergent powers and properties to activate the structural emergent powers and properties of governance bodies.

The design of my study allowed me to explore the question '*when, where* and under *what* conditions?' in more detail than I have indicated above thanks to the use of case studies. As I indicate in Chapter Four of this thesis, my study comprises two cases: one, the School of Health Sciences and the other, the School of Human and Social Sciences. Each of these cases presented very different responses to questions regarding '*when, where* and under *what* conditions'. I will now deal with each School separately.

7.2.1 The School of Health Sciences

In many respects, conditions in the School of Health Sciences appear to be more favourable to the emergence of change with respect to quality assurance. The structuring of the individuals teaching a profession in a School can be seen to be enabling the implementation of quality assurance for a number of reasons. In the first place, the health professions had developed programme-level outcomes at a national level for the training of future professionals. Membership of the profession then entailed working with these outcomes to develop a learning programme. As I indicate in Chapter Six, members of the School demonstrated a strong sense of ownership of the curriculum that could be linked to their professional status. The discursively-constructed claim that they 'knew' what students needed to be taught because of their experience as health professionals with local communities can be seen to be a strong driver of engagement with curriculum-related issues and teaching and learning more generally.

At the same time, the health professions provided other structural enablements in the form of their own quality assurance procedures. The health councils had been involved in accrediting training of future professionals and had visited universities in order to assure the quality of this training long before the introduction of quality assurance to South African higher education. Members of the School were therefore conditioned into accepting the need for the assurance of quality, and their professional status then prompted them into working with mechanisms intended to assure and promote it, including initiatives intended to develop their capacity as educators in higher education.

The structural enablement of the profession then prompted a strong discourse of 'ownership' of matters related to teaching and learning within the School. Participants in the study attested to attendance at meetings and general engagement in matters related to teaching and learning which this discourse then fostered – in critical realist terms, leading to the emergence of events at the level of the Actual.

While the professional status of the disciplines in the school was conducive to the adoption of quality and the implementation of quality assurance policies and procedures, a number of mechanisms then militated against this. Participants from the School in the study cited multiple understandings of quality. Predominant amongst these were understandings of quality as related to problem-based learning, the pedagogical approach adopted by the School more broadly following health education initiatives elsewhere in the world. As I indicate in Chapter Six, problem-based learning requires high levels of teaching expertise and, as participants also noted, the availability of large numbers of staff members able to provide input on a flexible basis. As a result of problems with staffing in the School and in the University more generally, the implementation of problem-based learning then put strain on available resources.

This is an instance where a broader understanding of quality as ‘fitness for purpose’ is arguably necessary, particularly if coupled with Biggs’ (1999) construct of ‘constructive alignment’. As I indicated above, outcomes for health-related programmes have largely been developed by the South African health councils. A ‘fit for purpose’ approach drawing on constructive alignment would then involve ‘lining up’ pedagogy, staffing, learning materials, assessment and so on in order to allow students to achieve these outcomes as well and as efficiently as possible. In identifying a pedagogical approach, constructive alignment and an understanding of ‘fitness for purpose’ would have required consideration of the way resources could support the approach chosen. This does not appear to have happened in the School. Rather, the School appears to have drawn on examples of so-called best practice in health education across the world in identifying problem-based learning as the most appropriate pedagogical approach. While problem-based learning might be an appropriate approach in other circumstances, it is not necessarily the ‘best’ approach in this particular context, given constraining conditions and, also, the composition of the student body.

Global educational discourses promote so-called 'best practices' in the literature and more broadly. As authors such as Kramer-Dahl (1995) point out, education is a form of 'cultural politics' involving the export of dominant philosophies and pedagogies from the economically dominant world to the rest. All too often, these philosophies and pedagogies do not transport well to contexts other than those in which they were developed because of cultural differences and material constraints (Canagarajah, 1993; Edge, 1996). It would appear that, from this perspective, the use of problem-based approaches in the School at The University of Venda would bear greater scrutiny. When coupled with the definition of quality as 'fit for purpose' there would then be an even greater call for consideration of the appropriateness of this approach in this particular context.

7.2.2 School of Human and Social Sciences

The School of Human and Social Sciences presents a more diverse cultural context than the School of Health Sciences. Although professional/vocational disciplines are represented by Social Work and, arguably, by entities such as the Institute for Youth and Gender Studies, which has, as one of its objectives, the provision of training for youth and women, other entities have a more strictly academic focus. The department of English, for example, offers a major course in English although it also offers a service course in English for the rest of the University. The professional 'core' evident in the School of Health Sciences certainly is not apparent in the School of Human and Social Sciences. This also means that members of the School have not been conditioned by the requirements of a profession to the same extent and that, arguably, they therefore call on traditions of 'academic freedom' more than their peers in Health Sciences. As one staff member notes in the interviews, this then results in a 'lack of uniformity' with regard to understandings of quality and, possibly, towards the implementation of quality related practices.

In Chapter Six, I identify conditions related to resistance to quality assurance in the School and attribute these to the fact that academics had long been accustomed to working with large numbers of 'underprepared' students under difficult conditions. A strong discourse related to academics claiming that 'they knew best' was identified

alongside the idea that management, from which the need for quality assurance was seen to emerge, could not 'know best' because of their lack of experience at the chalk face. As I pointed out, in South Africa, the Humanities and Social Sciences have borne the brunt of large enrolments of 'underprepared' students particularly at the historically black universities (Cooper and Subotzky, 2001). This has resulted in academics simply having to identify ways of coping with limited resources. In such circumstances, conditions are simply not conducive to change.

This lack of response to the need for change in the sense of accepting and implementing quality assurance policies and procedures can then be linked to other failures at institutional level – perceived failures of management to 'turn the institution around', a process which would be evidenced by improved conditions in the classroom and other working places.

In the School of Human and Social Sciences, therefore, it is arguably the case that conditions constraining the implementation of quality assurance policies and procedures are felt more acutely than in the School of Human Sciences.

7.3 A way forward?

When I originally began to conceptualise the study that underpinned this thesis, my intention was to develop a framework or model for the implementation of quality assurance at The University of Venda. I do not believe the design of my research allows me to do this. However, as I bring this thesis to a close, I do feel able to make a series of recommendations for the future based on my research. My question as I do this therefore turns to asking *what* and *whose* conceptual shifts might make changes more possible under *which* structural conditions.

7.3.1 What and whose conceptual shifts?

Throughout this Chapter, I have argued that conceptual shifts related to the introduction of quality assurance developed in global and national contexts were imposed upon The University of Venda from the outside. This process not only meant that academics were not convinced of the need for quality assurance but also that multiple understandings of the notion of quality were allowed to continue and even proliferate. From this

perspective, my first recommendation centres on the need for efforts to allow academics in the University to gain ownership of 'quality assurance'. This could be achieved through processes that allow academics to engage with, and contest, ideas around the need for the assurance of quality in institutions such as The University of Venda. As I have indicated throughout this thesis, to a large extent, the University has been isolated as a result of its status as an apartheid-created institution. Engaging with staff members around the institution's place in what is increasingly becoming a global system of higher education, and exploring the implications for quality of membership of that system, could go a long way to breaking down some of this isolation and to developing understandings of the need to assure quality in this particular context. Academics' sense of care and responsibility for the students they teach cannot be doubted. Locating this care within a more broad-based understanding of their students' needs in an increasingly globalised world, rather than in a rural area, could lead not only to a greater willingness to work with quality assurance but also to understandings of what this might mean which have been enriched by the criticality developed as a result of immersion in local contexts.

Engagements with academics would need to go beyond discussions of the rationale for quality assurance however, since they would also need to encompass the diverse understandings of quality in teaching and learning that are possible, and which are present in the University. As I have pointed out throughout this thesis, the dominant understanding of quality adopted by the Higher Education Quality Committee for its work in South African higher education relates to 'fitness of purpose'. This definition allows for the diverse institutional contexts that continue to prevail in the system to be taken into account, and also for a university to define its own purpose and then, literally, make itself fit for that purpose. My analysis shows little understanding of this definition yet, if understanding of this definition were more widespread, it could not only foster a greater willingness to engage with quality assurance but also empower academics in their work since they would have the responsibility for identifying 'fitness'. Quality in teaching and learning would not then be something imposed by management, as per Shore and Wright's (2000) critique, but could rather become something developed in specific teaching and learning contexts.

A number of structures intended to promote the assurance of quality in teaching and learning were established at The University of Venda. These include the Directorate of Institutional Planning and Quality Assurance and the Centre for Higher Education Teaching and Learning. These two entities, along with social actors such as Deans and Heads of Departments, could be charged with leading engagement with conceptual understandings of quality. What is clear, from my study, is that without such conceptual engagement there is little chance of change with regard to the implementation of quality assurance policies and procedures.

7.3.2 Whose policies and procedures?

As I have indicated earlier in this thesis, the policies on teaching and learning at The University of Venda were developed somewhat hurriedly in the face of the upcoming institutional audit to be conducted by the Higher Education Quality Committee in 2009. The policies were developed by an individual working in the Quality Assurance Unit without widespread consultation across the University. As I also indicated, the policies embody ubiquitous 'best practices' on teaching and learning promoted in the international literature on the scholarship of teaching and learning. So-called 'best practice' is not necessarily best for contexts such as The University of Venda, however, as I have indicated in my discussion above. The idea of 'learner-centredness', for example, may work in situations where students have the social and cultural resources to draw on to allow them to proceed with their learning more independently. This is not necessarily the case at The University of Venda, where the mostly working class students from deeply rural backgrounds will have had limited experiences on which to draw, both in life and through their engagement with written and oral texts.

In a similar vein, the construction of the academic teacher as a 'learning facilitator' in the Policy on Teaching and Learning will sit at odds with understandings of many of those teaching at the University, who themselves have only been exposed to fairly directive methods of teaching in their own education and whose own understandings of what it means to teach will therefore be more authoritarian than those embodied in the policies. As commentators have pointed out in relation to the introduction of outcomes-based education (see, for example, Harley, Barasa, Bertram, Mattson and Pillay, 2000 and, at

an international level, Wheelahan, 2010), the new roles allocated to educators essentially 'deskill' educators trained and experienced in very different traditions and understandings of what it means to teach. Harley et al. (ibid.) go on to cite Broadfoot, Osborn, Gilly and Paillet (1988) who note that:

. . . attempts to change teachers' practice without due regard to those conceptions of professional responsibility which are deeply rooted in particular national traditions, as well as more general classroom realities, will result in a lowering of morale and decreased effectiveness.

Given the formulation of policy without due regard to the situation 'on the ground' and to the experience of academic teachers, it is hardly surprising that the policies are not implemented and may even be resisted by some. As I pointed out in Chapter Six, academics in the School of Human and Social Sciences made statements such as:

I believe that I know my class better than anyone else. You might find out that the University is saying do this, but it doesn't work out that way.

And

It's only me who knows what is happening there, they don't know why is failure rate like this, why is this thing like this you know.

Given this situation, my second recommendation concerns the need to conduct a review of the policies 'bottom up', a review which began with a piece of research conducted by the Centre for Higher Education Teaching and Learning which identified 'best practices' in The University of Venda context. These identifications of such practices might need to focus on more micro contexts, that is, on what is best for particular Schools or disciplinary areas. In this process, academic teachers could be invited to share their expertise with others in order for judgements to be made about what indeed is 'best' at the University.

This sort of activity could have two further benefits other than the identification of practices that are both workable and effective in the specific context of the University.

These are that academics and their understandings of teaching could be both validated and, at the same time, challenged. Boughey and McKenna's (in press) analysis of the impact of the first cycle of institutional audits on teaching and learning in South African higher education argues for the need for constructions of teaching and learning to be challenged and for new theories about students' 'problems' to be inserted into the cultural 'stockpot' if change in the form of improved student performance data is to be achieved. Arguably, this might also be the case for The University of Venda. At the same time, there will undoubtedly be many understandings, such as those of academics who saw their students' journey through the University as a time of personal transformation and change that they needed to support (cited in Chapter Six), which will be worthy of validation.

My strong sense, having conducted this study, is that this sort of activity on the part of the Centre for Higher Education Teaching and Learning in collaboration with the Directorate of Institutional Planning and Quality Assurance, which would eventually lead to the revision of policies on teaching and learning, would be much more productive than generic workshopping and provision of courses on teaching and learning which do not always draw on local knowledge. It would also accord with the Higher Education Quality Committee's second cycle of quality assurance work in South Africa that focuses on the promotion of quality in the form of a Quality Enhancement Project. Importantly, funding would be available for the initiative from the Teaching Development Grant made available to the University by the Department of Higher Education and Training. This grant specifically allows for research on teaching and learning and would fund the sort of action research type of project I am envisaging.

The question would be, however, whether the courage could be found to embark on a project of this nature that could, effectively, disrupt many assumptions about teaching and learning currently being promulgated by those responsible for enhancing this area of institutional functioning.

7.3.3 When where and under what conditions?

A third recommendation arising from my study relates to the question of participation of academics in governance structures associated with the assurance of quality in

teaching and learning. As I have noted earlier in this thesis, participation in governance structures appears to be very limited. Even if academics attend meetings, their participation in debates and their willingness to challenge and discuss issues is not as it could be.

Clearly, change of this order is not simple to achieve and is unlikely to take place in the short term. The quality of chairing in meetings can be key here, however, as an effective Chair can encourage participation and debate while still allowing for key decisions and recommendations to be made. One strategy, therefore, might be to run a discussion forum or workshop for Chairs of committees to allow them to share techniques which are conducive to participation but which also allow the committee to move forward with an agenda.

A second strategy would relate to support from the secretariat for committee meetings. The efficiency and effectiveness of a committee is dependent on good support with the preparation of an agenda and the taking of minutes. Good support allows for 'matters arising' to be identified and for an agenda to ensure that unfinished business is attended to and action taken. Earlier in this thesis, I have noted occasions when items that needed a committee's attention were not placed on an agenda. Administrative support generally appears to be a problem in the University, but the training of committee secretaries could be made a priority.

The membership of Senate committees comprises representation from various entities across the University. Academics may be nominated to serve on such committees and may accept the nomination, but may not really understand their roles. Clarity about whom they represent, and where and to whom they then have a duty to report back, would contribute to ensuring that information is shared with constituents and also that action is taken in relation to decisions made and issues raised at the committees themselves. Learning to participate in institutional governance structures is arguably part of becoming a good academic citizen. The 'rules and conventions' of such participation is not always made clear to novice academics; however, including training in academic citizenship could be part of an orientation programme for them.

Another strategy would be to ensure that teaching and learning appears as a standing item on the agendas of School Boards and departmental meetings. Individuals representing these entities at Senate committees and other structures could then be allocated the responsibility not only to report back but also to ensure, in collaboration with the Chair, that action is taken at the School Board and departmental meetings.

Essentially, the strategies I have suggested above focus on strengthening the capacity of individuals to exercise their personal emergent powers and properties in relation to institutional structures. This would then allow for more effective interplay with those structures, leading to the emergence of more positive events related to the assurance of quality in teaching and learning alongside experiences of those events.

My fourth recommendation relates to structural conditions at The University of Venda and specifically to physical planning. In Chapter Six, I cite academics who noted that their inability to interact with colleagues on a regular basis impacted on their functioning. This inability to interact was due to the lack of office space and the dispersal of members of a department over several buildings. As I have noted earlier in this thesis, in recent years the Department of Higher Education and Training has made earmarked funding for the development of infrastructure available to South African universities. The use of this funding needs to be managed within an overall spatial development plan for the University. Such a plan would need to take into account the need for academics to have easy access to each other if maximum synergies are to be achieved from their intellectual efforts.

Until this point, I have focused on the amelioration of conditions constraining the implementation of policies and procedures related to the assurance of quality in teaching and learning. As I draw this thesis to a close, I move to a more positive position in making recommendations leading to the strengthening of enabling conditions.

As I have pointed out, The University of Venda has made enormous efforts to contribute to the development of its staff as professional educators in higher education by facilitating their enrolment in programmes leading to formal qualifications and by offering

short courses leading to certification in areas such as assessment and curriculum design. The University has drawn on the services of other South African universities to provide this professional development. While these initiatives are laudable, the cautions expressed regarding 'best practices' throughout the analysis chapters of this thesis need to be heeded in this context. My fifth recommendation would be that discussion with those presenting formal programmes and short courses from other universities should focus on the context of The University of Venda so that the pedagogies and approaches presented in the courses could be within a 'fit for purpose' model. Given what I have argued regarding, for example, student-centredness, there is little point in enrolling staff members in programmes that simply perpetuate such approaches without the criticality needed to take context into account.

The University of Venda has also instituted a number of initiatives intended to recognise and reward teaching, including Teaching Excellence Awards made by the Vice Chancellor. Indications are that rewards such as these are prompting academics to pay more attention to their teaching. However, such attention can only be fruitful if it occurs within wider understandings of meanings of quality and of what assuring it could involve.

7.4 Conclusion

In a document exploring quality assurance as a key issue in education, Allais (2009) refers to the 'lead parachute' debate. According to Allais (*ibid.*: 12),

... a lead parachute is a way of expressing the idea that all the right processes can be followed, exactly according to specification, but the processes can be doing the wrong thing.

In many respects, my analysis of the introduction of quality assurance to The University of Venda has shown the process to involve a lead parachute. In the face of the impending audit by the Higher Education Quality Committee, the University rushed to put in place structures to assure quality. Sadly, many of the measures developed to assure quality (for example policies on teaching and learning) were 'right' – an institution needs policies on teaching and learning. However, those policies did the 'wrong thing' by not sufficiently acknowledging context and not involving academics who had long wrestled with teaching and learning issues. Most significantly, those measures

did not involve working extensively in the cultural system of the University to convince academics of the need for quality and to develop appropriate and widespread understandings both of the definition of quality and of what assuring it could mean.

My study offers a number of recommendations intended to turn the lead parachute into a silk one. It is in the spirit of continual improvement that characterises quality assurance work that I offer them to The University of Venda.

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