INSTITUTIONALISING A SYSTEM FOR UNDERGRADUATE MODULE EVALUATIONS: AN ACTION RESEARCH STUDY

by

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I declare that the dissertation that I herewith submit for the qualification: M.A. Higher Education Studies at the University of the Free State is my independent work, and that I have not previously submitted it for a qualification at another institution of higher education.

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List of Acronyms

AIR	-	Association for Institutional Research
APDC	-	Academic Planning and Development Committee of Senate
BUSSE	-	Beginning of University Survey of Student Engagement
CEQ	-	Course Experience Questionnaire
CHE	-	Council on Higher Education
CLASSE	-	Classroom Survey of Student Engagement
CTL	-	Centre for Teaching and Learning
DIRAP	-	Directorate for Institutional Research and Academic Planning
GCCA	-	Graduate Careers Council of Australia
GDP	-	Gross Domestic Product
GST	-	General Systems Theory
HEMIS	-	Higher Education Management Information System
HEQC	-	Higher Education Quality Council
HoD	-	Head of Department
LSSE	-	Lecturer Survey of Student Engagement
NPHE	-	National Plan on Higher Education
NSS	-	National Student Survey
OECD	-	Organisation for Economic Co-operation

QEP	-	Quality Enhancement Plan
SAAIR	-	South African Association for Institutional Research
SAR	-	Systemic Action Research
SASSE	-	South African Survey of Student Engagement
SEEQ	-	Students' Evaluation of Educational Quality
SRC	-	Student Representative Council
SSM	-	Soft Systems Methodology
TLM	-	Teaching and Learning Manager
UFS	-	University of the Free State
UK	-	United Kingdom
Unisa	-	University of South Africa
USA	-	United States of America

Abstract

Understanding the learning experiences of students at higher education institutions is important if institutions are to enhance the quality of their teaching and learning. One mechanism for gathering feedback from students on their learning experiences, is module evaluations. For module evaluations to play a role in quality enhancement it is important that institutions have policies and procedures that govern the process of module evaluations to ensure that student feedback is optimally used to enhance teaching and learning practices. Module evaluations at the University of the Free State (UFS) have been conducted inconsistently, with modules being evaluated in some departments, but not in others. Different module evaluation instruments were also used across different faculties. The need to institutionalise module evaluations was furthermore highlighted in the Higher Education Quality Council's (HEQC) quality audit of the UFS in 2006. The need to develop a framework within which module evaluations could be institutionalised at the UFS was therefore evident.

In this dissertation, I have attempted to provide such a framework for institutionalising module evaluations at the UFS, grounded in systems thinking. The following overarching research question guided this study:

> *How can the UFS effectively institutionalise module evaluations as one mechanism for enhancing quality of teaching and learning?*

In attempting to answer this question, three sub-questions further guided the study:

1. How do primary stakeholders (students and lecturers) experience module evaluations?
2. How can these experiences be used to enhance module evaluation procedures?
3. How can systems thinking contribute to the process of effectively institutionalising module evaluations?

In this action research study, a mixed methods design was employed to explore the experiences of the primary stakeholders in the module evaluation process at the UFS, namely students, lecturers and Teaching and Learning Managers (TLMs). Quantitative data from more than 25 000 students was collected over the three phases of the action research study by means of an institutional module evaluation questionnaire. Qualitative data was collected from all three stakeholder groups over the first two phases of the study. Six focus groups were conducted among students, while 25 lecturers, 16 students and six TLMs were interviewed to understand the primary stakeholder experiences of module evaluations.

The findings of the research were integrated and analysed using a systems thinking framework. A more comprehensive understanding of module evaluations at the UFS was facilitated by identifying firstly the components that make up the system and secondly how these components affect and relate to each other. This understanding enabled the provision of guidelines concerning the use of module evaluation results including providing feedback to students and outlining the roles of lecturers, TLMs and Heads of Departments (HoDs) in the module evaluation process.

Samevatting

Dit is belangrik om die leerervarings van studente in hoëronderwysinstellings te verstaan ten einde die gehalte van onderrig en leer te verbeter. Een meganisme vir die invordering van terugvoer van studente rakende hulle leerervarings, is module evaluerings. Vir module evaluerings om ‘n rol in gehaltebevordering te speel, is dit belangrik dat instellings beleide en prosedures daarstel wat die module evalueringproses reguleer om te verseker dat studente-terugvoer optimaal gebruik word om onderrig- en leerpraktyke te verbeter. Module evaluerings by die Universiteit van die Vrystaat (UV) is egter tot dusver onkonsekwent uitgevoer, met modules wat geëvalueer word in sommige departemente, maar nie in ander nie. Verskillende module evaluering-instrumente is ook gebruik oor fakulteite heen. Die behoefte om module evaluerings te institusionaliseer is verder uitgelig in die Hoëronderwys Gehalteraad (HEQC) se gehalte-oudit van die UV in 2008. Die noodsaaklikheid om ‘n raamwerk te ontwikkel waarbinne module evaluering geïnstitusionaliseer kon word was daarom voor die hand liggend.

In hierdie verhandeling het ek gepoog om so ‘n raamwerk vir die institusionalisering van module evaluering te voorsien, gegrond op sisteemdenke. Die volgende oorkoepelende navorsingsvraag het hierdie studie gelei:

Hoe kan die UV module evaluerings as een meganisme vir die gehalteverbetering van onderrig en leer effektief institusionaliseer?

In ‘n poging om hierdie vraag te beantwoord het drie sub-vrae die studie verder gelei:

1. Hoe ervaar primêre belangegroepe (studente en dosente) module evaluerings?
2. Hoe kan hierdie ervarings gebruik word om prosedures van module evaluering te verbeter?
3. Hoe kan sisteemdenke bydra daartoe om module evaluerings effektief te institusionaliseer?

In hierdie aksienavorsingstudie is ‘n gemengde metodes navorsingsontwerp gebruik om die ervarings van die primêre belangegroepe in die module evalueringsproses by die UV, naamlik die studente,

dosente en Onderrig- en Leerbestuurders (OLBs) beter te verstaan. Kwantitatiewe data van meer as 25 000 studente is ingesamel oor die drie fases van die aksienavorsingstudie deur middel van ‘n institusionele module evaluering-vraelys. Kwalitatiewe data is van al drie belangegroepe ingesamel gedurende die eerste twee fases van die studie. Ses fokusgroepe is uitgevoer onder studente en onderhoude is gevoer met 25 dosente, 16 studente en ses OLBs om die ervarings van die primêre module evaluering-belangegroepe te verstaan. Die navorsingsbevindinge is geïntegreer en ontleed deur gebruik te maak van ‘n sisteemdenke-raamwerk. ‘n Meer omvattende begrip van module evaluering by die UV is bewerkstellig deur eerstens die komponente waaruit die sisteem bestaan te identifiseer en tweedens te verstaan hoe hierdie komponente mekaar beïnvloed en met mekaar verband hou. Hierdie begrip het die voorsiening van riglyne rakende die gebruik van module evaluering resultate, wat die voorsiening van terugvoer aan studente insluit, sowel as die uiteensetting van die rolle van dosente, OLBs en Departementshoofde in die module evaluering-proses moontlik gemaak.

Chapter 1: Introduction

"Teaching appraisals are like a compass on a ship: without one, no one has a sense of direction – all hands are lost. A student's assessment of a teacher is always subjective, at times unfair, and possibly, stressful, but it is one of the few instruments to indicate if we are about to sail off the edge of the world or discover a new continent" (Ravelli, 2000, p.3).

1.1 Background

Understanding the learning experiences of students is important if higher education institutions are to assure and, more importantly, enhance the quality of their teaching and learning. Like the ship's compass referred to in the quotation above, students' feedback on their learning experiences is a key mechanism that helps to guide universities in their quest to improve quality. As such it becomes paramount that data is not only available to provide insight into student learning experiences, but that it is also used optimally at various levels of an institution to promote the quality enhancement of teaching and learning. Module evaluations[1], which are the focus of this study, can be used as one of these mechanisms for gathering feedback from students about their learning experiences, therefore serving as a teaching and learning compass.

In this dissertation I have attempted to understand module evaluations at the University of the Free State (UFS) through a systems thinking lens. The central premise of systems thinking, which was developed from General Systems Theory (GST) (Von Bertalanffy, 1972), is that 'the whole is greater than the sum of its parts'. Using systems thinking as a theoretical framework in this study thus

[1]'Module evaluations' are frequently referred to as 'student evaluations' or 'student evaluations of teaching' or 'course evaluations'. The term 'module evaluations' is used in this dissertation as this is the term used at the UFS.

facilitated the understanding of the multiple components of module evaluations, but also how these components affect and relate to each other.

This action research study was conducted at the UFS as part of an institutional module evaluation pilot project and included the exploration of the experiences of the primary stakeholders in the module evaluation process: students, lecturers, and Teaching and Learning Managers (TLMs)[2]. The outcome is a positioning of module evaluations at the UFS as a system in its own right which enables a better understanding of how module evaluations currently work at the institution. In the concluding chapter of this dissertation, I propose selected recommendations for a more effective and efficient module evaluation system.

1.2 Problem statement

Low success rates[3] at higher education institutions are concerning across South Africa (Council on Higher Education, 2014b). Less than a third of students graduate from a three year undergraduate programme in the minimum allowed time. Furthermore, more than 40% of students do not complete their qualifications in the minimum allowed time plus two years (Council on Higher Education, 2014b). Quality of teaching and learning is thus a central concern nationally. Improving the quality of higher education in South Africa is also emphasised in the National Development Plan where it is clearly stated that the improvement of success rates is dependent on quality teaching and learning (National Planning Commission, 2011).

In addition, according to Higher Education Management Information System (HEMIS) audited data, the UFS had a total success rate of 77.2% in 2013, one of the lowest success rates among universities in South Africa (DIRAP, 2015). The UFS, with a graduation rate of 21.1%, also had one of the lowest graduation rates among universities in South Africa in 2013 (DIRAP, 2015).

[2] One TLM is appointed in each faculty of the UFS. TLMs are responsible for promoting good teaching and learning practices in the faculty and to support lecturers in teaching and learning.
[3] Percentage of students enrolled for a module who pass the module

It is necessary to understand teaching and learning at an institution before the quality thereof can be improved. For this, data is necessary. Given the extensive use of module evaluations in higher education worldwide (Keane & Labhrainn, 2005) and the possibility to use it as a measure of the quality of teaching and learning at an institution (Kember, Leung, & Kwan, 2002), it becomes essential that there is an institutional system within which these evaluations can be conducted effectively and used to improve practice.

Module evaluations at the UFS, however, have been conducted inconsistently. They have been used in some departments but not in others and different instruments have been used across faculties. At present, there are also no specific institutional guidelines for the use of module evaluation results. These inconsistencies contribute to the difficulty the UFS experiences in using the data from these evaluations to improve teaching and learning institutionally. As part of its first round of quality audits of higher education institutions in South Africa, the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC), permanent subcommittee of the Council on Higher Education (CHE), also identified the university's lack of an institutional module evaluation system as an area of concern:

> *"The Panel urges the institution to ensure that student evaluations are institutionalised and used consistently across departments in order to ensure comparability and the rapid and effective addressing of teaching and learning problems" (Council on Higher Education, 2008, p.51).*

Thus, an urgent need exists for the UFS to develop an institutional system for module evaluations. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to develop a framework for a system for conducting institution-wide module evaluations at the UFS.

1.3 Research aim, objectives, and questions

In responding to the problem outlined in section 1.2, the aim of this research was to provide an understanding of module evaluations at the UFS as an institutional system to ultimately allow for the

institutionalisation of module evaluations at the university. The overarching research question that guided this study was: *How can the UFS effectively institutionalise module evaluations as one mechanism for enhancing quality of teaching and learning?*

In attempting to answer this question, three sub-questions guided the study:

1. How do primary stakeholders (students and lecturers) experience module evaluations?
2. How can these experiences be used to enhance module evaluation procedures?
3. How can systems thinking contribute to the process of effectively institutionalising module evaluations?

In answering the research questions I planned to achieve 3 broadly defined outcomes, namely to provide a systems thinking-based framework for institutionalising a system for module evaluations at the UFS, to make recommendations concerning policies and procedures for institutional module evaluations at the UFS, and to make a contribution to the broader literature on the role of primary stakeholder experiences of institutional module evaluation systems, especially in the South African context. In order to achieve these outcomes, the following objectives were identified:

1. Explore module evaluation experiences of lecturers, students and TLMs;
2. Review and enhance the institutional module evaluation instrument used at the UFS;
3. Make use of primary stakeholder empirical data and lessons learned from systems thinking to enhance the process of institutionalising module evaluations; and
4. Provide guidelines for the use of module evaluation results to improve the quality of teaching and learning.

1.4 Researcher positioning

This study was carried out as a part of a pilot project to institutionalise module evaluations at the UFS at the request of the rectorate of the university. The pilot project, which stretched over a period of 2 years (2013 – 2014) was driven by the Directorate for Institutional Research and Academic Planning

(DIRAP), the division within which I was employed at the start of the pilot. I was closely related to the pilot project in that I was tasked with carrying out research on stakeholder experiences of module evaluations, and also responsible for the central administration of institutional module evaluations as part of my role in DIRAP. Given the richness of the data that emerged from the pilot project, I decided to use and build on the data for a Master's dissertation.

Being so closely involved in the project had its opportunities, but also its hindrances. It had opportunities in that my involvement allowed me to follow an action research approach which, because it involved studying practices with the view to improve practice, was the ideal approach to meet the objectives of what I set out to achieve with this study. It allowed me to be involved in the practices I was investigating, which enabled me to understand these practices from the perspective of a participant in the module evaluation process. Due to my role in the project it was a challenge, though, to remain objective in the evaluation of current module evaluation practices. Given my use of action research methodology and the positioning of the study within a pragmatist paradigm (see Chapter 5), assumptions of research objectivity were not made. Instead, I sought to approach the study and my analysis of the empirical data in a critically reflective manner.

Before the end of the project, however, I moved to another division[4] at the UFS, and was thus in a position to now look at the module evaluation process from another perspective, one in which I was less directly involved. This was helpful, especially as I was already employed in the new division by the time I started to analyse and integrate the findings of the research. My working experience throughout this study thus allowed me to zoom in and out of the UFS module evaluation process from different perspectives, which I believe helped me to understand the module evaluation system of the UFS. See Chapter 8 (section 8.3.5) for further reflections on my role as the researcher.

[4] I was appointed at the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) at the UFS from 1 May 2014

1.5 Value of the study

The first, most apparent contribution of this study is that it addresses an institutional need at the UFS. This is a need that had been explicitly identified by the CHE in the quality audit of the UFS in 2006, but that had also implicitly been identified through the need for evidence-based practices to promote quality enhancement of teaching and learning at the institution. This study addresses this need by providing an understanding of module evaluations from a systems thinking perspective which enables one to understand module evaluations as a system within its own right. This understanding is helpful in the development of an institutionalised approach to module evaluations at the UFS.

Apart from addressing an institutional need at the UFS, this study also makes a broader contribution to the literature. The views and experiences of primary stakeholders on module evaluations and the module evaluation process have not been widely researched[5]. The findings of this study make a valuable contribution to the literature, specifically within a South African context, on approaches to gathering student feedback on their learning experiences through module evaluations. The study further contributes to the literature by using systems thinking as a theoretical framework for understanding module evaluations from a fresh perspective and builds on a relatively new, but growing application of systems thinking in the higher education context.

1.6 Chapter outline

This section presents an overview of the contents of each of the nine chapters that this dissertation consists of. The findings of the research are presented over three chapters (Chapter 6, 7 and 8) instead of one chapter that is traditionally allocated to research findings in a Master's dissertation. The decision to split the results chapters emanated from seeking to present the quantitative and qualitative

[5] I presented a paper at the South African Association for Institutional Research (SAAIR) Forum in November 2013 on the emerging findings of the research for which I received the Best Paper award, which was an indication of the novelty of the research, especially in the South African context. I went on to present the paper at the Association for Institutional Research (AIR) in Orlando, Florida in 2014 where further interest was shown in the research from a number of conference delegates who wanted to implement similar strategies at their institutions to gather feedback from the stakeholders of their module evaluation processes.

findings, each as a chapter of its own, to highlight the specific contributions of the findings of each in understanding module evaluations at the UFS. The third results chapter then integrates these findings through a systems thinking lens to position module evaluations as a system and to analyse the implications of this positioning for the functioning of the module evaluation system at the UFS. By splitting the findings of the research into three chapters, I also provide the reader with chapters of a more manageable length. A summary of each chapter is presented below:

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter sets the scene for the study. It starts off with a brief background to present a rationale for why this topic was selected. The chapter includes the problem statement and a summary of the research objectives and research questions guiding this study. I also reflect on my position as the researcher of this study. This chapter ends with an overview of the contributions of this study before, lastly, presenting this chapter outline.

Chapter 2: Contextualising higher education

In this chapter, I first discuss some of the key trends in higher education globally including the massification of higher education, increased marketisation of the sector, and the growing importance accorded to student satisfaction. This leads to the need for gathering systematic evidence on student learning experiences in higher education institutions worldwide. A historical background is provided as well as an overview of the current context of higher education in South Africa. I position the importance of student feedback within quality enhancement processes at higher education institutions before discussing quality enhancement and module evaluations within the UFS context specifically.

Chapter 3: Module evaluations in the literature

In Chapter 3, I focus on module evaluations in the literature, starting with the purpose of module evaluations and a review of the aspects that need to be considered in the development of a module evaluation instrument. This is followed by a review of two of the most frequently used module evaluation instruments at various universities across the globe. I then provide an account of the

advantages and disadvantages of online versus paper-based module evaluations. After this, I discuss the issue of response rates of module evaluations by covering what an adequate response rate should be for module evaluations, as well as strategies for improving response rates in the literature. This chapter is closed by a review of literature on the module evaluation experiences of students and lecturers.

Chapter 4: Systems thinking: a theoretical framework

From the outset, systems thinking has been positioned as the theoretical underpinning of the study. In this chapter, I present an introduction to systems thinking including the concepts central to understanding systems thinking, as well as a summary of the underlying assumptions of it. This is followed by a review of literature on the use of systems thinking in higher education. Systems thinking is then applied to the UFS using the components and dynamics of a system to understand the UFS context. The chapter is concluded by making a case for action research as an appropriate methodology for systems research.

Chapter 5: Methodology

In Chapter 5, I position the research within the pragmatist paradigm and go on to discuss mixed methods as the chosen research design, after which I provide an overview of the specific mixed methods approach followed in this study. A case is then made for using an action research approach and I also align a model of systems thinking with the action research phases of the study. This methodological discussion is then continued by discussing the sampling and data collection over each of the three action research phases of the study. This is followed by a reflection on the ethical considerations that I needed to bear in mind throughout this study. Lastly, I provide an overview of my approach to data analysis.

Chapter 6: Quantitative research results

This chapter starts off with an overview of the qualitative data that was collected in the study. I then describe how the institutional module evaluation instrument was adapted over the three research

phases of this study. This is followed by a discussion of module evaluation results and a conclusion to the chapter with a presentation of response rates across the different research phases.

Chapter 7: Qualitative research results

The focus of Chapter 7 is on the rich qualitative research findings. The chapter is divided into three main sections, one for the findings of each of the three primary stakeholder groups: lecturers, students and TLMs. In each of these sections, the experiences of a particular stakeholder group is presented by including the group's experience of module evaluations in general and experience of module evaluation process related issues. Chapter 7 is a particularly lengthy chapter, due to the richness of the qualitative data collected. When weighing up the relative merits of discussing the depth of the qualitative findings and the need to manage the length of the dissertations, I decided that the data richness and depth of the presentation was more important.

Chapter 8: Towards a system for module evaluations at the UFS

Chapter 8 presents the integration of the findings presented in Chapter 6 and 7 and an overarching analysis of the findings using a systems thinking framework. I first conceptualise module evaluations at the UFS as a system within its own right and then move on to apply systems thinking principles to the UFS module evaluation system to understand the dynamics of the system.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

I revisit the research questions that guided the study in this concluding chapter of the dissertation, reflecting on the lessons learned and the recommendations that derived from each research question. The limitations of the study are also highlighted in this chapter and concluded with a reflection on the value of the research as well as implications for future research.

Chapter 2: Contextualising higher education

This chapter contextualises international and South African higher education by presenting key trends in higher education that impact, be it directly or indirectly, the use of module evaluations as a form of student feedback. It is not in the scope of this study to provide a comprehensive account of all the trends in higher education. It is, however, important to understand the higher education context in order to understand the role of student feedback in higher education. As argued in the sections below, this role is specifically within processes of the quality enhancement of teaching and learning. Student feedback, of which module evaluations are a specific form, is thus subsequently positioned within the quality enhancement processes in South African higher education.

In the final section of this chapter, a description is provided of the UFS context broadly in terms of a profile of its students and staff and the performance of students over the past five years. I move on to quality enhancement at the UFS and the role of student feedback within the quality enhancement processes at the university. This chapter is concluded by briefly describing the module evaluation process at the UFS that pre-empted the institutional module evaluation pilot. This is followed by a more detailed background of the institutional module evaluation pilot at the UFS which ran from 2013 – 2014 and during which this study was conducted.

2.1 Higher education globally

Trow (2007) argues that three stages characterise the development of higher education: elite, mass and most recently, universal. During the elite stage the role of higher education was to prepare the ruling class for elite roles in society. Before the Second World War, enrolments had been constant at between 3 – 5% of the relevant age groups in rich democratic societies. The Second World War was the turning point for access to higher education in modern democratic societies. After the war, higher education shifted to a mass model as there was a need for the transmission of skills to prepare students

for a broader range of, what had previously been, elite roles in societies. There was suddenly a dramatically increased demand for access to higher education and enrolments grew from 3 – 5 % prior to the war, to 30 – 50% in the years after the war (Watson & Watson, 2013). In mass higher education, the focus was still on higher education for the elite, but in larger numbers and in a broader range of skills areas (Trow, 2007).

The need for the development of a broader range of skills is one of the factors that underlies the emergence of what has been termed the knowledge economy (Altbach, 2015). In one of its first reports on the knowledge economy, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 1996, p.7) defined knowledge economies as "economies which are directly based on the production, distribution and use of knowledge and information". An increasing demand for more highly-skilled workers calls upon the knowledge economy to, through a distribution of knowledge, provide enabling conditions to produce highly-skilled workers (OECD, 1996). Olssen and Peters (2005) note that economies globally are now more dependent on knowledge production, distribution and use than ever before. It is in the production and distribution of knowledge that higher education plays a vital role in the knowledge economy. The central role that education plays in the knowledge economy was also highlighted by the OECD in their initial research on the topic (1996, p.14): "Education will be the centre of the knowledge-based economy, and learning the tool of individual and organisational advancement". A number of scholars have critiqued the idea of higher education institutions primarily serving the interest of the economy. This is mainly because it takes away from the importance of the wider social purposes that higher education ought to serve, such as social development (For examples, see Bastalich, 2010; Giroux, 2002; McArthur, 2011; Morley & Lussier, 2009). When higher education institutions are developed to focus mainly on meeting the demands of business it becomes an industry for enhancing competitiveness and leads to the marketisation of the sector (Olssen & Peters, 2005). The marketisation of higher education, another important global trend, is discussed further in section 2.1.2 of this chapter.

Currently higher education in many countries and regions is undergoing yet another transformation: from a mass model to a universal model. The universal model of higher education requires adapting

the entire population to fast-paced technological and social change (Watson & Watson, 2013). Universal higher education is concerned with preparing large numbers of students for a life in an advanced industrial society. Students who are trained in the universal model of higher education are not only the elite in a given society, they now increasingly represent all segments of the population (Mok & Neubauer, 2015; Trow, 2007). While these trends have been identified globally, as is discussed below, South African higher education is still undergoing the massification process.

Thus, globally higher education enrolments have seen fast-paced growth over the past two decades as the need for access to higher education to become increasingly universal has intensified. The growth in enrolments has outpaced world Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth (British Council, 2012). Global tertiary enrolments were estimated at 170 million in 2009 with four countries accounting for a combined share of 45% of the total global tertiary enrolments: China, India, the United States of America (USA) and Russia (British Council, 2012). In the USA, the 21st century has seen a rapid growth in student participation in higher education with almost 50% of 18 – 19 year-olds and almost 36% of 20 – 24 year-olds enrolled for higher education qualifications in the USA (Heller, 2009).

Africa is the least developed region of higher education globally in terms of the number of higher education institutions and participation rates. Teferra & Altbach (2004) reported that there were less than 300 institutions on the entire continent that fit the definition of a university. In addition, with the global massification of higher education, the demand for access to higher education in Africa has increased considerably. This is as a result of higher education being recognised more and more as a key force for modernisation and development. Despite the demand, participation rates remain low in Africa, compared to the participation rates of developed countries (Teferra & Altbach, 2004; Wilson-Strydom & Fongwa, 2012).

The massification of higher education brings with it a number of challenges, one of which is being able to provide access and maintain quality simultaneously. The balance between providing access and quality assurance is discussed in the next section of this chapter.

2.1.1 Quality and massification of higher education

Increased enrolment numbers and increasing costs to government led to an urgency to manage growth and maintain quality (El-Khawas, 2007). Pitman, Koshy and Phillimore (2015, p.612) define three aspects of quality in higher education: input, process and outcome. Input quality is measured by prior academic scores of students enrolling at a university. It is hence a measure (or proxy) of the quality of students entering an institution. Process quality is measured by the ability of the student to progress through their studies. Retention and success data provide insight into an institution's process quality, where retention can be measured as the percentage of students who 'drop out' before obtaining their qualifications and where success can be measured as the proportion of units passed within a year. Finally, outcome quality is the graduation rate, in other words, the number of students obtaining their qualifications. As will be seen below, South African universities face challenges with respect to input, process and output aspects of quality.

With the focus on widening access, the quality of inputs (students) now at higher education institutions has inevitably changed. More students gaining access means that there has been a shift from only elite students, who mostly attended elite and high performing schools, being allowed into universities, to providing access to the majority of the population (Trow, 2007). This means that students enter university with a range of prior education experiences. Thus, the focus of quality at higher education institutions has increasingly shifted from input quality in the past, to process quality and outcome quality at present. In terms of process quality and outcome quality, much has been written about poor success rates, worrisome drop-out rates and strategies to improve these (For examples, see Cruz & Haycock, 2012; Letseka & Maile, 2008; Pitman et al., 2015; Scott, Yeld, & Hendry, 2007; Smith, 2015; Subotzky & Prinsloo, 2011; Wood, 2012). Addressing process quality at institutions, has thus become crucial. At the same time as higher education enrolment has been rapidly growing, there has been a growing focus on accountability, and this also has implications for quality.

El-Khawas (2007, p.24) distinguishes between accountability, quality assurance and quality enhancement. Accountability refers to governmentally-initiated efforts to place obligations on

institutions to address institutional performance and to be able to prove that they are offering services of adequate quality. Quality assurance calls on higher education institutions to submit themselves to some form of external scrutiny in order to provide public assurances that the services that they offer are worthwhile. Quality enhancement, on the other hand, refers to policies that call for improvement of academic institutions. Hence, institutions need to be accountable for the quality of their offerings, and prove that the quality of these offerings is at an adequate standard through quality assurance processes. However, to ultimately improve the quality of its offerings, policies need to be in place for quality enhancement.

A predicament that higher education faces, is providing wide access to good quality higher education. Daniel, Kanwar and Uvalić-Trumbić (2009) add an extra dimension to this dilemma namely higher education needs to be provided at a low cost since it is no longer regarded as an elite form of education. These three dimensions consequently form the so-called iron triangle, where achieving one goal often comes at the expense of the other two dimensions of the triangle, illustrated by the quote below from Daniel et al. (2009, p.33):

> *"Packing more students into bigger lecturer halls may increase access but will lower quality, defined as faculty-student interaction, unless the cost is increased by hiring more teachers. Similarly, attempts to improve quality usually restrict access and raise costs".*

Daniel et al. (2009) makes an important assumption in that quality in this context is defined as faculty-student interaction. It is important to note that quality in higher education is a contested concept and can be defined in multiple ways (Nicholson, 2011). In section 2.2 of this chapter, the issue of how quality is defined is taken up in more detail with a focus on quality in South African higher education. However, before turning attention to South Africa specifically, it is important to further explore the definition of quality noted by Daniel et al (2009, p. 33) above. Achieving quality lecturer-student interaction, one key pillar of quality teaching and learning (Chickering & Gamson, 1999), is indeed hampered where there are ever increasing numbers of students in classes, unless, as Daniel et al. (2009) suggest, higher education comes at a higher cost.

2.1.2 Marketisation and student satisfaction

As was mentioned in section 2.1, one of the effects of being responsive to the needs of the growing knowledge economy, is that higher education has to meet the demands of the labour force (Olssen & Peters, 2005). Moreover, as participation increases, maintaining quality of higher education institutions becomes more costly (Daniel et al., 2009). This has led to higher education institutions increasingly functioning as corporations. Giroux (2002, p.442) describes the marketisation of higher education as follows:

> *"In the never-ending search for new sources of revenue, the intense competition for more students, and the ongoing need to cut costs, many colleges and university presidents are actively pursuing ways to establish closer ties between their respective institutions and the business community".*

The cost of a university degree has increased more rapidly than the average income of families or measures of price inflation (British Council, 2012; Heller, 2009). Similarly, attracting students has become increasingly competitive for higher education institutions and retaining enrolled students has become equally important. For example, in the context of England, the White Paper on Higher Education in England (Department for Business Innovation and Skills., 2011, p.2) states:

> *"We want there to be a renewed focus on high-quality teaching in universities so that it has the same prestige as research. So we will empower prospective students by ensuring much better information on different courses. We will deliver a new focus on student charters, student feedback and graduate outcomes".*

Dill (2014) notes that policies in higher education flare up competition among higher education institutions. Such policies firstly adopt competitive mechanisms for the allocation of government funding of higher education institutions. Secondly these policies mandate the provision of academic quality information to students. In addition, the more prominent role that tuition fees play in university funding further adds to the competitive nature of higher education institutions. Competition

among universities and the implications that this has for higher education has also been criticised in the literature. McArthur, (2011, p. 742) for instance notes:

> *"Rather than higher education being a journey of transformative experience, it is simply a packaging and marketing process: the degree is the shiny ribbon on the top of the box. It becomes and object of commodity fetishism, representing nothing other than its exchange value for higher salaries and status".*

Despite these criticisms, heightened competition among higher education institutions has nonetheless put a growing emphasis on student satisfaction as a means for attracting and retaining students. Although customer satisfaction is not a new organisational concept, customer orientation has more recently been introduced in the higher education sector compared to profit-oriented organisations (Kara & DeShields, 2004). This growing focus on the student as a customer or a client, together with the increased marketisation of higher education is also not without its critiques (For examples, see Lomas, 2007; McArthur, 2011). While it is important to acknowledge these critiques, it is beyond the scope of this study to consider these in depth. However, it is important to note that while student satisfaction can be seen as a manifestation of the positioning of students as customers in a marketised higher education environment, these measures potentially also provide an important avenue for bringing student voices into teaching and learning quality discussions. This last purpose is the focus of this study.

The United Kingdom (UK) and Australia provide useful international examples of quality assurance systems that have included a strong emphasis on student feedback. In the UK, the National Student Survey (NSS), which has been administrated since 2005, gathers feedback from students on programmes and institutions with the aim of improving the quality of teaching and learning and the student experience (Douglas, Douglas, McClelland, & Davies, 2015). The Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) plays a similar role in Australia (McKimm, 2008). Student feedback is an important part of internal quality processes at an institution (Forest, 2007). The use of the NSS and the

CEQ are examples of how student feedback can be used to measure an aspect of quality of teaching and learning at institutions. These measures are discussed in greater depth in Chapter 3.

As noted in the introductory chapter, the focus of this study is on understanding the implementation of a system for student feedback at the UFS. It is therefore important to also understand higher education in South Africa to, more specifically, understand the role that student feedback plays in quality assurance, and the more recent quality enhancement processes.

2.2 Higher education in South Africa

In this section, a brief historical background of higher education in South Africa is provided, followed by a description of the current context. Student feedback is then positioned within quality enhancement processes in South Africa to set the scene for the role student feedback plays at the UFS.

2.2.1 Historical background

Higher education in South Africa has transformed massively since the demise of apartheid. By 1997, key higher education policy and legislation, in the form of the Education White Paper 3 – A Programme for Higher Education Transformation (1997) and the Higher Education Act (1997), was in place to enable the transformation of higher education in the country. The restructuring of the higher education sector was one of the first changes in the post-apartheid South Africa. This restructuring involved the establishment of new institutional types, consisting of 23 public universities and universities of technology. Therefore, it allowed for a more integrated system to cater for the needs of the South African workforce (Badat, 2010). More recently, this number has further expanded with the establishment of three new universities (one in the Northern Cape and one in Mpumalanga, plus a new Health Sciences university), bringing the total number of public universities in the country to 26.

Returning to the post-apartheid transformation of higher education, the National Plan on Higher Education (NPHE) (Ministry of Education, 2001) provided a framework for restructuring the system

to achieve the vision and goals outlined in the Education White Paper 3 (Ministry of Education, 1997). The main priorities outlined in the NPHE were to (Ministry of Education, 2001):

- Increase participation to meet the need of the South African labour force through the balanced production of graduates from varied disciplines;
- Redress past inequalities so that student profiles reflect the demographic realities of the country;
- Achieve diversity in the higher education system;
- Sustain and promote research; and
- Restructure the institutional landscape of the higher education system to improve the efficiency of the South African higher education system

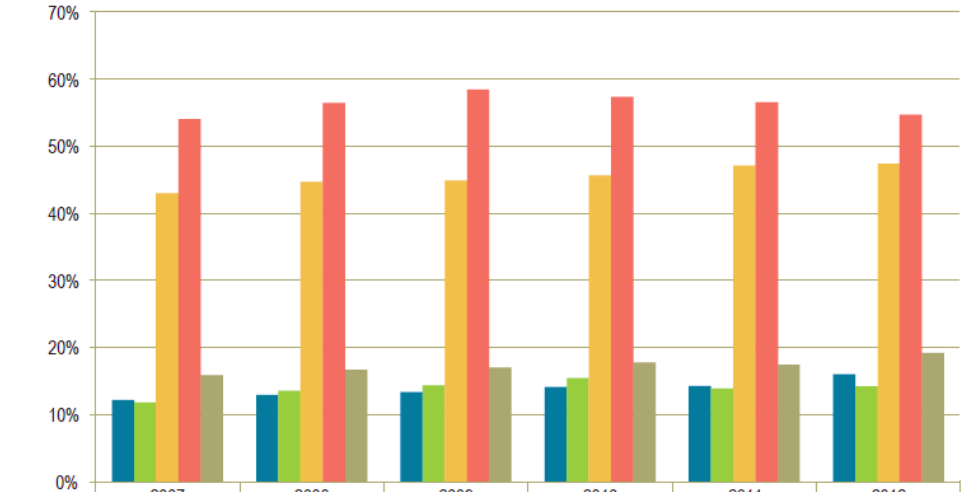
A number of organisations were established by government to co-ordinate quality enhancement in the higher education system. The Council on Higher Education (CHE) was established in 1998 as an independent statutory body which also plays a role in quality assurance of South African higher education through its permanent committee, the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) (Council on Higher Education, 2007). The HEQC has four main purposes (Council on Higher Education, 2014a, p. 1):

- Programme accreditation (ensuring that minimum standards are met in programme offerings);
- National reviews (evaluating specific programmes offered in the light of good practice);
- Institutional audits (assessing higher education institutions' internal quality mechanisms); and
- Quality promotion and capacity development (providing training and information sharing opportunities to improve quality management)

This section provided an overview of the historical background of South African higher education. In the next section, the current context is discussed which highlights the need to improve the quality of teaching and learning in higher education in the country.

2.2.2 Current context

Higher education in post-apartheid South Africa has seen a dramatically increased demand for access to Higher Education. However, despite the need for a workforce that is skilled at a number of levels, but especially equipped with critical and creative thinking skills to contribute to the knowledge economy of the country, the number of students in higher education in South Africa remains relatively small compared to developed countries. Only 19% of people aged 20 – 24 in South Africa were enrolled in higher education in 2012 (Council on Higher Education, 2014a). **Figure 2.1** below shows the participation rates by race grouping from 2007 – 2012.

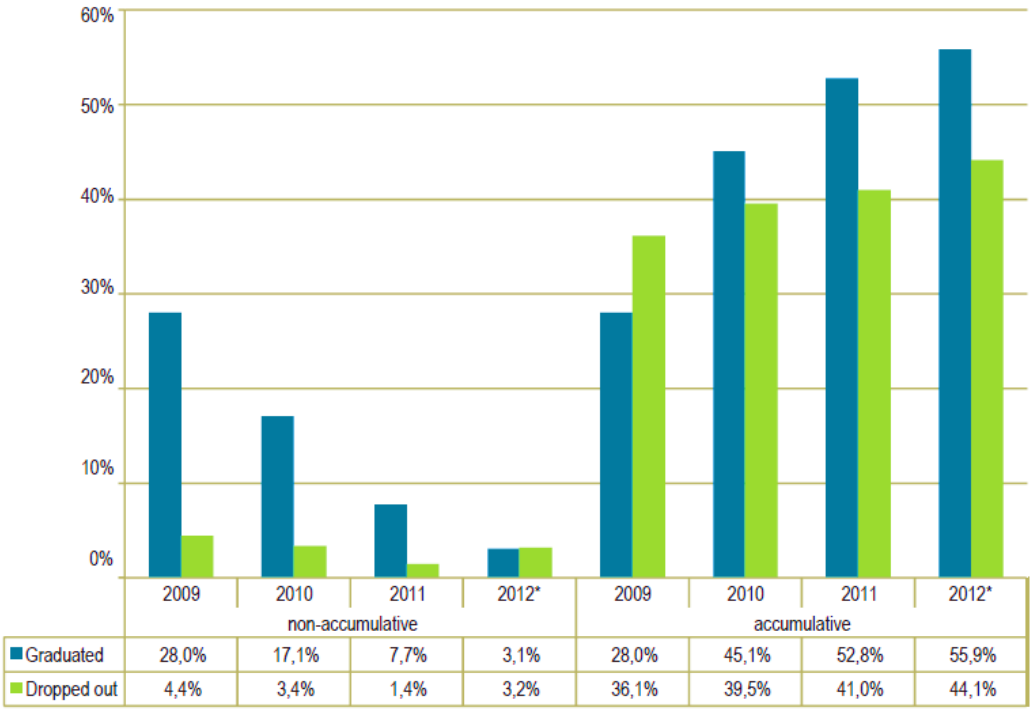


	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
African	12%	13%	13%	14%	14%	16%
Coloured	12%	14%	14%	15%	14%	14%
Indian	43%	45%	45%	46%	47%	47%
White	54%	56%	58%	57%	57%	55%
Overall	16%	17%	17%	18%	17%	19%

Figure 2.1: Participation rates of higher education in South Africa by race from 2007 -2012 (Council on Higher Education, 2014b, p.5).

Figure 2.1 highlights that, despite the low participation rate, there has been an increase in the participation of all previously disadvantaged racial groups from 2007 to 2012, albeit a slight increase. Furthermore, the participation rates for previously disadvantaged groups remain low compared to the participation rate among White students, who still account for the majority of students enrolled in higher education in South Africa, despite being the minority in population statistics.

Throughput rates are also poor. Only 28% of the cohort of students entering public higher education in 2007 completed 3-year degrees in the minimum expected regulation time. Furthermore, only[6] 37,8% of the cohort of students entering public higher education in 2007 completed 4-year degrees within the minimum expected regulation time[1] (Council on Higher Education, 2014b). **Figure 2.2** and **Figure 2.3** illustrate these throughput rates.



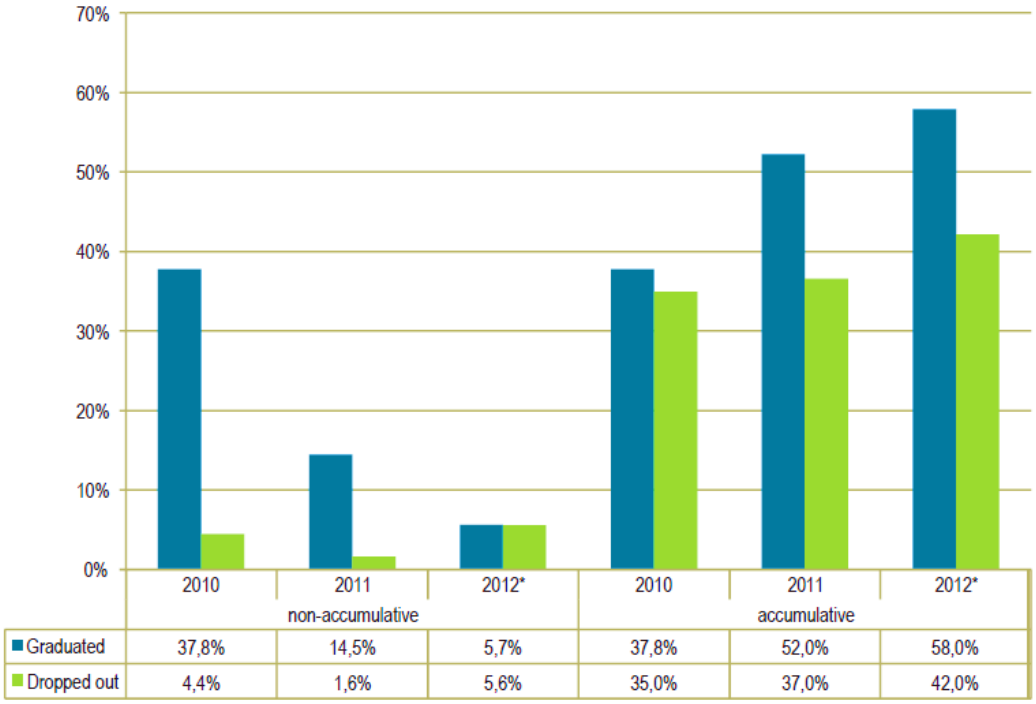
	2009	2010	2011	2012*	2009	2010	2011	2012*
	non-accumulative				accumulative			
Graduated	28,0%	17,1%	7,7%	3,1%	28,0%	45,1%	52,8%	55,9%
Dropped out	4,4%	3,4%	1,4%	3,2%	36,1%	39,5%	41,0%	44,1%

Figure 2.2: Throughput rates for 3-year degrees with first year of enrolment in 2007 (Council on Higher Education, 2014b, p.62).

Figure 2.2 shows that only 28% of students in the 2007 cohort enrolled for 3-year degrees, completed their degrees within the minimum expected regulation time. Only 55.9% completed their degrees in 6 years' time (which is double the required minimum expected regulation time). In addition, a total of 44.1% of students dropped out by 2012. The non-accumulative percentages, as indicated on **Figure 2.2**, refer to the percentage of students who graduated or dropped out in that particular year only. It does not include students of the cohort who graduated or dropped out in previous years. Alternatively,

[6] This cohort of students excludes students enrolled for qualifications at the University of South Africa (Unisa) since throughput rates are much lower for distance education students compared to contact students.

accumulative percentages include all the students of the particular cohort who have graduated or dropped out in previous years as well.



	2010	2011	2012*	2010	2011	2012*
	non-accumulative			accumulative		
Graduated	37,8%	14,5%	5,7%	37,8%	52,0%	58,0%
Dropped out	4,4%	1,6%	5,6%	35,0%	37,0%	42,0%

Figure 2.3: Throughput rates for 4-year degrees with first year of enrolment in 2007 (Council on Higher Education, 2014b, p.64).

Figure 2.3 shows that more students of the 2007 cohort completed 4-year degrees within the minimum regulated time (37.8%) than the 3-year degree. Ultimately, however, only 58% of students completed their 4-year qualifications by 2012 with a total dropout rate of 42% by 2012. The data presented in the section above shows that South African higher education is a system with low participation and high attrition. Consequently, there is an urgent need for the quality enhancement of undergraduate teaching and learning in South Africa.

These challenges were placed at centre stage in the 2013 White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2013), which stated its main policy objectives to be expanding access, improving quality and increasing diversity. The following statement encapsulates the vision the White Paper set out to achieve in terms of providing access whilst simultaneously improving quality of higher education (Ministry of Education, 2013, p.5):

> *"The achievement of greater social justice is closely dependent on equitable access by all sections of the population to quality education. Just as importantly, widespread and good quality education and training will allow more rapid economic, social and cultural development for society as a whole. Education will not guarantee economic growth, but without it economic growth is not possible and society will not fulfil its potential with regard to social and cultural development. For the education and training system, this indicates a need to expand access to post-school opportunities far beyond what is currently available, while simultaneously ensuring that the quality of our entire post-school system improves".*

As is evident from this quotation, as well as the system-level data presented above, quality issues are fundamental in turning around the current low participation, high attrition system. Before the CHE was established in 1998, quality assurance of higher education in South Africa was not centrally coordinated. Between 2004 and 2011, a first period of quality assurance was driven by the HEQC and all public higher education institutions (as well as 11 private higher education institutions) underwent institutional audits. The definition of quality on which this process was built was formulated as follows (Council on Higher Education, 2014a, p.11):

> *"The pursuit of the principle of quality means maintaining and applying academic and educational standards, both in the sense of specific expectations and requirements that should be complied with, and in the sense of ideals of excellence that should be aimed at. These expectations and ideals may differ from context to context, partly depending on the specific purposes pursued. Applying the principle of quality entails evaluating services and products against set standards, with a view to improvement, renewal or progress".*

The focus of this first round of institutional audits was the quality assurance processes of universities. Audit reports identifying institutions' strengths and developmental areas and making recommendations for improvement were produced by panels conducting the institutional audits. After the first round of audits the HEQC identified teaching and learning as the core function of higher

education institutions in the most urgent need for improvement (Council on Higher Education, 2014a, p.2):

> *"The HEQC is of the view that of the three core functions of higher education, namely, teaching and learning, research and community engagement, the one that is in greatest need of immediate attention and improvement if the national need for more highly skilled graduates is to be addressed is teaching and learning".*

In the context of the high attrition and poor success rates presented above, there is increased pressure on higher education institutions to be accountable for their teaching and learning. Being accountable for the quality of its teaching and learning places emphasis on internal quality procedures at higher education institutions. Many factors influence internal quality processes. Holtzhausen (2000, p.124) identified three internal influences that promote quality processes at an institutional level of higher education institutions:

1. Commitment of leaders to quality assurance;
2. Willingness to conduct the process; and
3. Usefulness of stated intentions (purposes, goals, objectives) to the quality assurance system.

These aspects highlight the importance of attitudes and behaviours of key role-players in order to successfully implement internal quality procedures. Holtzhausen (2000) further suggests that an openness to staff and student opinions is crucial in an effective internal quality assurance system. Gathering and acting upon student feedback is thus one evidence-based way in which institutions can take responsibility for the quality of its teaching and learning through internal quality assurance procedures.

2.2.3 Quality enhancement and student feedback

As was noted in the previous section, the main purpose of the first round of institutional audits carried out by the HEQC was to gain an understanding of the nature and extent, and to evaluate the effectiveness of the quality assurance systems in place in higher education institutions (Council on

Higher Education, 2003). **Figure 2.4** provides a schematic overview of the purposes of the first round of quality audits.

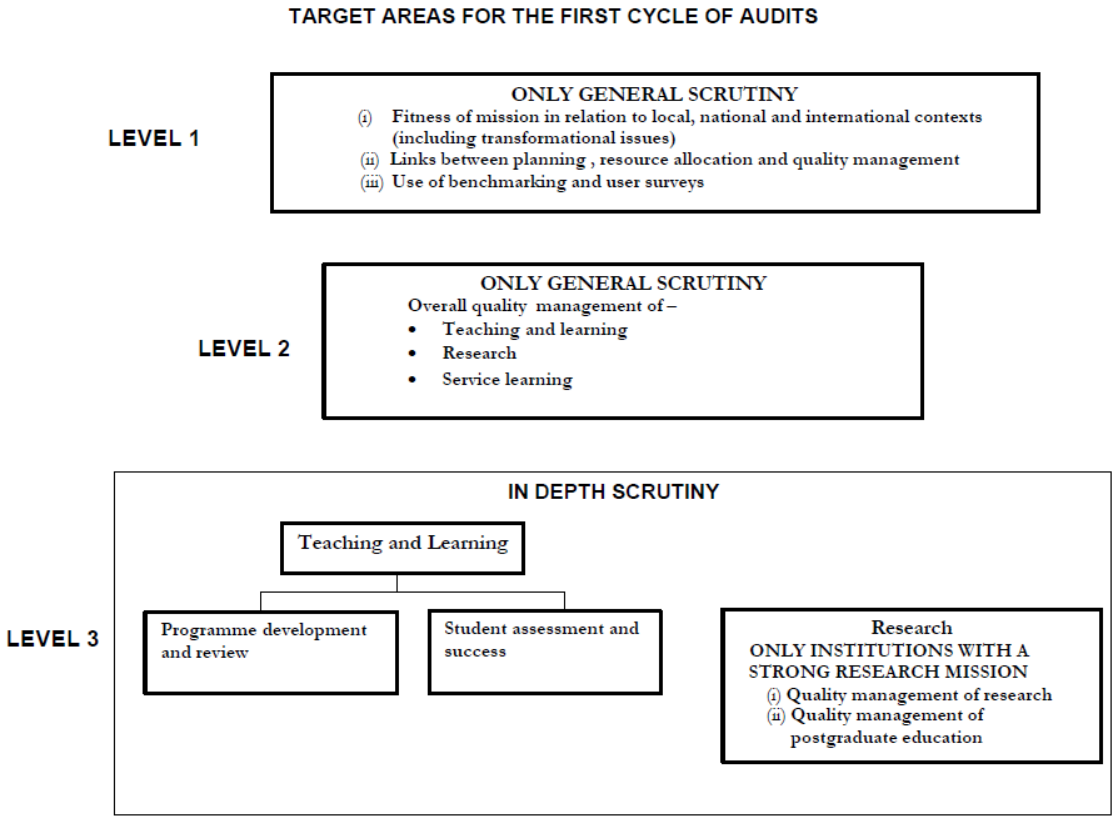


Figure 2.4: Overview of the focus of audits in the first audit cycle of the HEQC (Council on Higher Education, 2003, p. 15).

Figure 2.4 shows that the overall quality management of teaching and learning was placed under general scrutiny in the first cycle of audits of the HEQC. This focus is precisely where students' feedback on their learning experiences play a role. The CHE document outlining the criteria for the first audit cycle (Council on Higher Education, 2003) does not explicitly make mention of the role of student feedback in the general quality management of teaching and learning. However, it does specify "quality management mechanisms for ensuring and enhancing the quality of teaching and learning at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels" (p.21) as an example of what was expected to be in place in order for institutions to meet the criterion. The HEQC therefore highlighted the importance of having in place mechanisms for the quality enhancement of teaching and learning,

although mechanisms were not specified. The UFS quality audit report is discussed further in section 2.3 of this chapter, where specific mention is made of the role of module evaluations (as a form of student feedback) as a mechanism for quality enhancement of teaching and learning.

The Quality Enhancement Project (QEP), replaced institutional audits in the HEQC's second cycle of quality assurance which started in 2012 and will continue until 2017. The focus has shifted from a more general overview of the quality enhancement processes at institutions (among which teaching and learning is one) which characterised the first cycle, to enhancing all aspects of teaching and learning to improve student success in the second cycle. Student success is defined in this context as (Council on Higher Education, 2014a, p.ii):

> *"Enhanced student learning with a view to increasing the number of graduates with attributes that are personally, professionally, and socially valuable".*

This definition highlights three important aspects: that student learning needs to be enhanced, that the number of graduates needs to be increased and that graduates need attributes that are personally, professionally and socially valuable (Council on Higher Education, 2014b). Improving student success will thus require addressing all three of these aspects. In order to address the first aspect and enhance student learning, we must first understand student learning experiences. Furthermore, for this to be achieved, evidence-based mechanisms need to be in place at an institutional level. Module evaluations are an example of such an evidence-based mechanism.

Following the first cycle of audits a number of issues were identified which have become the focus of the QEP. As part of the first phase of the QEP, public higher education institutions had to submit documents which provided baseline information on how they were engaging with the first four selected focus areas:

1. Enhancing academics as teachers;
2. Enhancing student support and development;
3. Enhancing the learning environment; and
4. Enhancing course and programme enrolment management.

In a recent publication, the CHE provides a content analysis of institutional submissions on these focus areas (Council on Higher Education, 2015). The focus on gathering evidence on the student experience was a central theme in the report. The premise is that initiatives should be evidence driven to be successful. From the data that was analysed and presented by the CHE in this report, it also becomes clear that it is equally important that insights that emerge from gathering data is integrated into decision-making processes at a systemic level.

Although little mention is made of module evaluations as a tool for gaining insight into the student learning experience in the reviewed CHE publications on quality assurance in South Africa, several needs which module evaluations can play a part in addressing are identified. Examples of these are the need to enhance student learning, the need to enhance academics as teachers, and the need to make evidence-based decisions in the teaching and learning space. It is therefore also a contribution of this study, to show how module evaluations can be used by institutions to better understand the student learning experience, which is positioned so centrally in the quality enhancement approach. This understanding is crucial if attempts for improvement are to be made.

2.3 The University of the Free State context

The UFS was established in 1904 in Bloemfontein, South Africa with six students. It has since grown to over 31 000 students, 4000 staff members (including academic and support staff), with seven faculties on three campuses (UFS, 2015). Initially, the UFS was mainly comprised of White Afrikaans-speaking students of which a large proportion came from the Free State farming community. However, despite the university's conservative reputation it was one of the first Afrikaans universities in South Africa to open its doors to Black students and to offer classes in both English and Afrikaans. The university admitted its first Black postgraduate students in 1977 and its first Black undergraduate students in 1983 (Fourie & Alt, 2000). In line with national transformation imperatives, the UFS has since transformed its student profile from predominantly White Afrikaans students to a majority of Black students, receiving instruction in English. Of the 31100 students that were enrolled

at the UFS in 2014, 71% were Black (DIRAP, 2015). Moreover, the university's student numbers have increased drastically over the past 14 years with a student enrolment of just over 10 000 in the year 2000 (Fourie & Alt, 2000) to 31 100 students in 2014 (DIRAP, 2015), which means that student numbers more than tripled over the last 15 years. **Figure 2.5** and **Figure 2.6** show the racial and language profile of UFS students over the past five years.

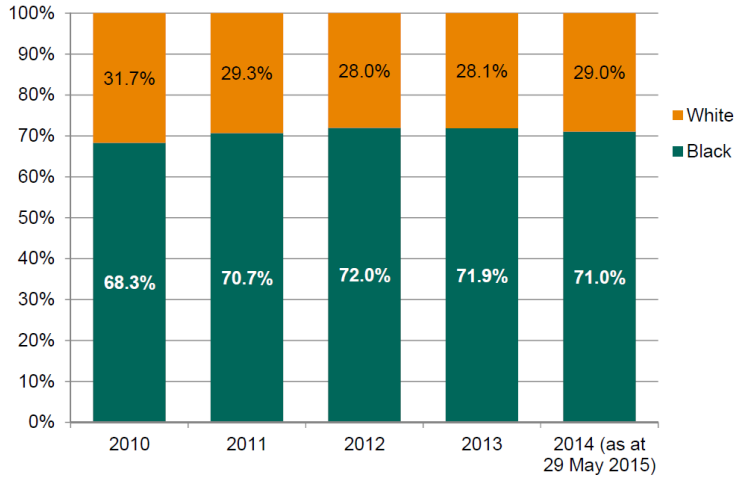


Figure 2.5: Total student headcount enrolments per race (DIRAP, 2015, p.16).

Figure 2.5 illustrates the racial profile of UFS students over the last five years. The racial profile appears to have remained mostly stable over the past five years with the percentage of Black students steadily making up around 70% of student enrolments. This illustrates how the racial profile has changed over the past 15 years from White students making up the majority of student enrolments in the early 2000s, to 2014 where this percentage has shrunk to more closely (but still not exactly) reflect the racial composition of the country.

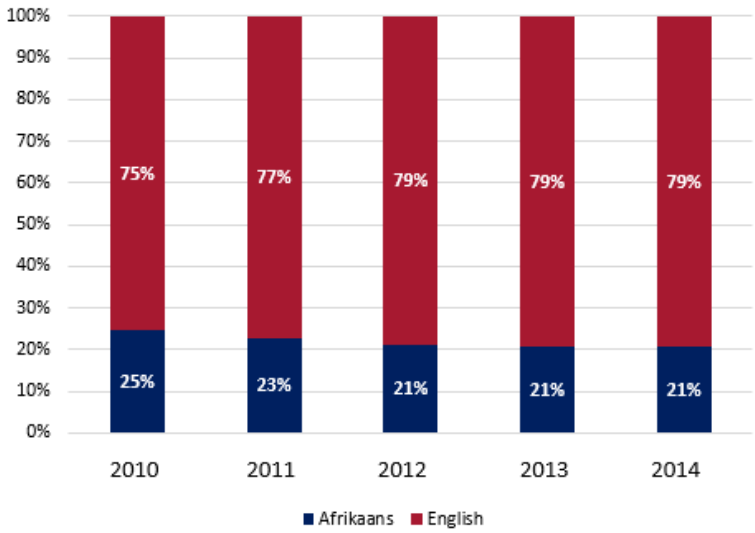


Figure 2.6: Total headcount enrolments by preferred language of instruction.[7]

Figure 2.6 illustrates that the majority of UFS students prefer to receive instruction in English. Over the past five years the number of students who prefer to be instructed in English steadily increased. From 2012 until 2014 79% of students preferred English as language of instruction.

As UFS student numbers increased over the years, the university expanded its access to three campuses. At present the UFS has two campuses in Bloemfontein (Bloemfontein and South campus) and one in Qwaqwa. **Figure 2.7** shows the number of students on each of the three campuses.

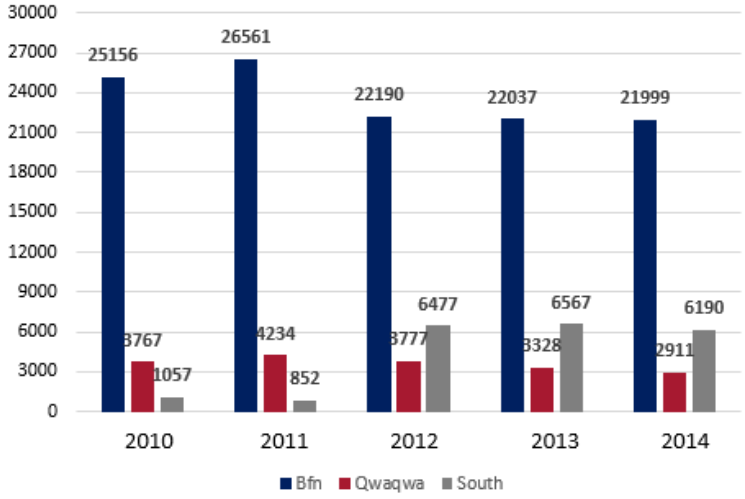


Figure 2.7: Student headcount enrolments per campus.[8]

[7] Data sources: 2010 – 2013: HEMIS audited data; 2014: Operational (unaudited) data as on 17 June 2015 as received from DIRAP.
[8] Data sources: 2010 – 2013: HEMIS audited data: 2014: Operational (unaudited) data as on 17 June 2015 as received from DIRAP.

Figure 2.7 illustrates that the majority of UFS students are located at the Bloemfontein campus with fewer students on the Qwaqwa campus where students can only enrol for qualifications from four of the UFS' seven faculties (Economic and Management Sciences, Education, Humanities and Natural and Agricultural Sciences). On the South campus, students are primarily enrolled in the University Preparation Programme (UPP)[9] or for extended programme modules. The School for Open and Distance Learning is also located here. Since the institutional module evaluation pilot was focused on undergraduate modules specifically, this study only focused on the Bloemfontein and Qwaqwa campuses.

The majority of UFS students are enrolled for undergraduate qualifications. **Figure 2.8** shows student enrolments by qualification level. It is for this reason that the institutional module evaluation pilot, and consequently also this study, focused on evaluations of undergraduate modules.

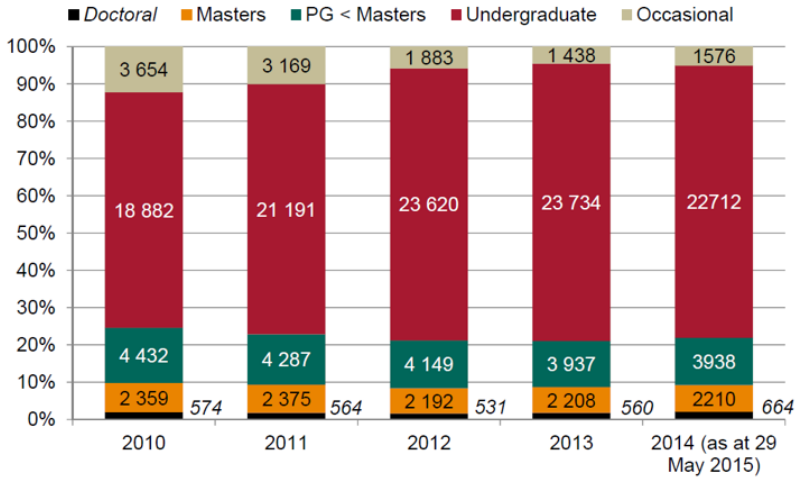


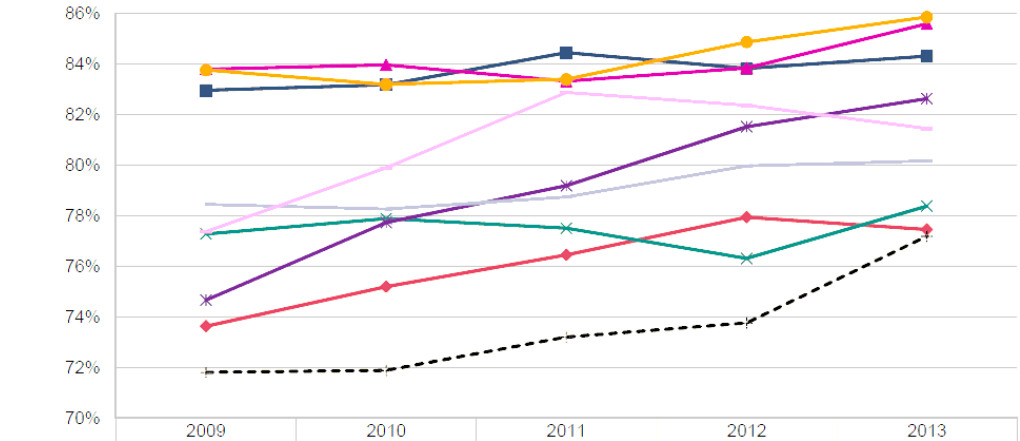
Figure 2.8: Total student headcount enrolments by qualification level (DIRAP, 2015, p.6).

Despite the transformation of the race profile of students, the majority of academic staff are still White. In 2014, 76.6% of the 1995 academic staff members at the UFS was White (DIRAP, 2015). Furthermore, the majority of academic staff are appointed at junior lecturer and lecturer level at the university. In 2014, 35.3% of all academics appointed at the UFS were in possession of a doctoral degree (DIRAP, 2015).

[9] The UPP is an accessibility programme helping students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds who did not obtain the required admission points to enter mainstream or extended programmes at the UFS, to gain access to higher education in especially the fields of Economic and Management Sciences, the Humanities, and Natural and Agricultural Sciences.

Although student numbers have increased dramatically over the past decade, academic staff numbers have not. Some of the challenges lecturers face at the institution thus include teaching large classes, sometimes of more than 1000 students (such as first year Economics, first year Statistics, first year Psychology and others), teaching students from vastly different socio-economic and education backgrounds from their own, and the increased workload that goes with having to teach in two languages which is a requirement of the UFS language policy (CTL, 2013a). These challenges are likely to play a role in poor success and graduation rates, which are indicators of process and outcome quality of the university.

According to audited HEMIS data, in 2013, the UFS had a total success rate of 77.2%, and although this shows an increase of just over 5% since 2009, it is nonetheless one of the poorest success rates among comparable Universities in South Africa (See **Figure 2.9**).

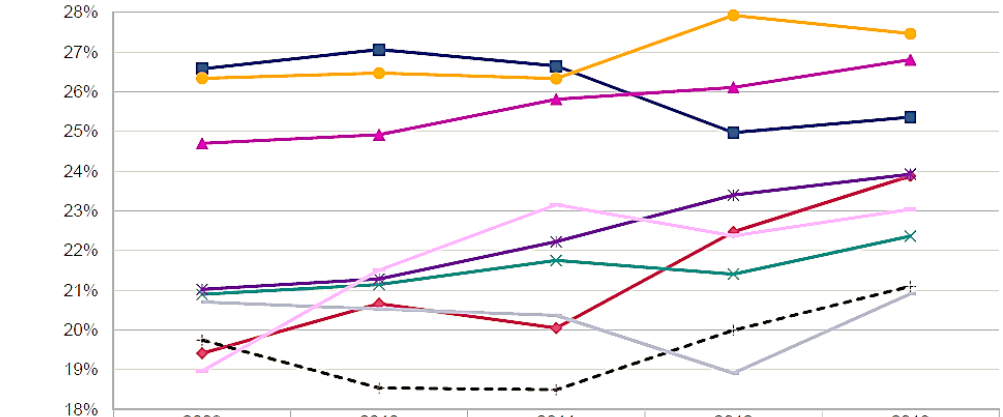


	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
NMMU	73.63%	75.20%	76.45%	77.94%	77.46%
NWU	82.96%	83.18%	84.45%	83.83%	84.31%
UCT	83.80%	83.97%	83.32%	83.84%	85.59%
UFH	77.28%	77.89%	77.51%	76.31%	78.38%
UJ	74.66%	77.73%	79.19%	81.52%	82.63%
SU	83.76%	83.19%	83.40%	84.87%	85.86%
UFS	71.80%	71.88%	73.20%	73.76%	77.19%
UWC	78.45%	78.26%	78.74%	79.97%	80.17%
WITS	77.37%	79.89%	82.88%	82.37%	81.45%

Figure 2.9: Degree credit success rates of universities in South Africa (DIRAP, 2015, p.4).

Furthermore, in 2013 the UFS had a graduation rate of 21.1%, which is also one of the lowest graduation rates among universities in the country (DIRAP, 2015) (See **Figure 2.10**). Hence, the need

for sound quality assurance procedures, as well as a sustained focus on quality enhancement of teaching and learning at the UFS is evident from this data.



	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
NMMU	19.41%	20.66%	20.05%	22.47%	23.88%
NWU	26.58%	27.06%	26.65%	24.97%	25.36%
UCT	24.70%	24.92%	25.81%	26.11%	26.81%
UFH	20.90%	21.14%	21.75%	21.40%	22.36%
UJ	21.02%	21.29%	22.22%	23.40%	23.92%
SU	26.33%	26.47%	26.33%	27.92%	27.46%
UFS	19.75%	18.54%	18.50%	19.99%	21.10%
UWC	20.71%	20.53%	20.37%	18.91%	20.91%
WITS	18.96%	21.51%	23.16%	22.37%	23.04%

Figure 2.10: Graduation rates of universities in South Africa (DIRAP, 2015, p.3).

2.3.1 Quality enhancement at the UFS

In 2006, the HEQC undertook a quality audit of the UFS as part of its first cycle of quality audits of higher education institutions described in section 2.2.2 of this chapter. Through this endeavour, the HEQC investigated institutional quality management systems at the UFS. In its institutional report on the UFS quality audit (Council on Higher Education, 2008) one recommendation, particularly relevant to teaching and learning, was to make the improvement of teaching and learning at the university an urgent priority and to subsequently develop a quality management system that integrates accountability. The report furthermore specifically recommends that module evaluations, as a mechanism for the measurement of the quality of teaching and learning and thus part of the quality management of teaching and learning, be institutionalised:

> *"The panel urges the institution to ensure that student evaluations are institutionalised and used consistently across departments in order to ensure comparability and the rapid*

> *and effective addressing of teaching and learning problems"* (Council on Higher Education, 2008, p.51).

More recently and in line with national trends discussed above, the university has developed a new quality enhancement framework (DIRAP, 2014) which was put forward in 2014 to serve as strategic direction of quality enhancement of the core functions of the university: research, teaching and learning and community engagement. The document states that the effectiveness of teaching and learning specifically must come to the forefront in quality assurance processes at the UFS. Furthermore, there needs to be a better understanding of teaching and learning at the institution, and about what works and what does not work. The approach to quality assurance adopted in this institutional framework builds on six principles (DIRAP, 2014, p.8):

1. Academic freedom;
2. Faculty leadership;
3. Accountability;
4. Student engagement;
5. Evidence; and
6. Impact

The UFS Quality Enhancement Framework makes specific mention of module evaluations as means for students to provide feedback on their learning experience. It states that module evaluation data, in conjunction with other sources of student feedback (for example, student engagement data,[10] student interviews, and focus groups during accreditation site visits) should be utilised to actively engage students on their experience of the quality of their academic experience.

Module evaluations are also a tool that can be used to reflect on teaching and learning at the institution. It is a means of getting a glimpse into how students experience a module, and to assist in pointing out what works and what does not work. Module evaluations have the potential to provide an

[10] Student engagement data is collected at the UFS by using a combination of the South African Survey of Student Engagement (SASSE), Classroom Survey of Student Engagement (CLASSE), Lecturer Survey of Student Engagement (LSSE) and Beginning of University Survey of Student Engagement (BUSSE). A report on student engagement at the UFS is published annually which presents the data on student engagement at the UFS.

evidence-based approach to internal quality processes at the UFS. The UFS Teaching and Learning Strategy (CTL, 2013b), further states that assessment of the quality of teaching and learning at the institution is necessary in cultivating an evidence-based culture for change and improvement. Combining module evaluation and student engagement data is a way in which the quality of teaching and learning can be monitored and evaluated at the module-level. The intent to combine module evaluation data with student engagement data, as stated by the Teaching and Learning Strategy (CTL, 2013b) of the UFS, is one way in which the module evaluation data can be used institutionally in the assessment of teaching and learning. Despite the potential usefulness of module evaluation data, and the important role it can play in the institution's internal quality assurance processes, no formal system for module evaluations currently exists at the UFS, hence the significance of this study. In the next section, an overview is provided of how module evaluations at the UFS have been used mostly in an ad-hoc manner, which is the specific focus of this action research study.

2.3.2 Module evaluations at the UFS

Fourie and Alt (2000) conducted a study 15 years ago at the UFS which provided contextual factors specific to the UFS that needed to be taken into account in the development of quality assurance measures. They proposed strategies for the adoption of such measures at the institution. Some of the contextual factors they identified are still at play at the university today, such as the difference between the student profile and the academic staff profile and the added workload of having to teach in English and Afrikaans. In this study, Fourie and Alt conducted a situation analysis to determine which quality assurance (self-evaluation) mechanisms and procedures existed in academic departments, at that time, through means of a questionnaire distributed to Heads of Department (HoDs) of the UFS. One item on the questionnaire asked HoDs to identify gaps in the quality assurance processes of the institution. The following quotes from HoDs are related to module evaluations at the UFS at that time, and are worth quoting again here (Fourie & Alt, 2000, p. 119):

> *"We have not found an acceptable way of evaluating the actual teaching process".*

> *"We don't know whether lecturers present quality teaching".*

"No formal student evaluation system of staff exists in the department".

The quotes above show that 15 years ago, the need for an effective module evaluation system had already been identified. Yet, it was not until the institutional module evaluation pilot in 2013 that the development of such a system was prioritised on an institutional level. Before 2013, module evaluations had been conducted inconsistently at the UFS. While module evaluations were an established method of gathering student feedback in some faculties and departments, modules were not evaluated in others. Furthermore, each faculty had its own module evaluation questionnaire which meant that the data gathered could not be used institutionally to make inferences about teaching and learning.

A module evaluation discussion document, based on an analysis of existing module evaluation questionnaires and procedures, was circulated to faculties early in 2013, identifying the purposes of an institutional module evaluation system and outlining a proposed institutional module evaluation pilot. The purposes of institutional module evaluations were specified as (DIRAP & CTL, 2013, p.1):

- Providing a means for students to provide their opinions and experiences concerning teaching and learning at the UFS;
- Providing a means for the institution to monitor students' learning experiences on module, departmental, faculty and institutional levels over time;
- Providing data to be used as part of quality enhancement processes at the university;
- Providing an early warning system to identify modules that would benefit from teaching and learning support; and
- Providing evidence that academic staff at the university can include as one component of their portfolios submitted for promotion purposes.

As such, the starting point in the development of an institutional module evaluation system was the development of a questionnaire that could be used institutionally for module evaluations which would allow for analyses at module, department, faculty and institutional levels. An institutional questionnaire was developed by a working team (of which I was a member) consisting of members

from DIRAP and CTL by first conducting a literature review of questionnaires used at other South African, as well as some international universities. The questionnaires UFS faculties used prior to the institutional pilot initiative were also reviewed, identifying common questions and differences of emphasis. The result was an institutional module evaluation questionnaire consisting of 32 quantitative items and 3 qualitative items (DIRAP & CTL, 2013). Adaptations were made to the instrument at the end of 2013 based on input gathered from students during the pilot. The original and adapted versions of the institutional module evaluation questionnaires are covered in more depth in Chapter 5 and Chapter 7.

Furthermore, the Module Evaluation Discussion document (DIRAP & CTL, 2013) outlined a proposed procedure for implementing institutional module evaluations at the UFS. The Academic Planning and Development Committee of Senate (APDC), which consists of representatives from all faculties, DIRAP, the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL), Student Affairs, as well as student representatives, was tasked with approving the module evaluation pilot and the emerging procedures. The APDC approved the institutional module evaluation pilot on 1 February 2013 (UFS, 2013). A phased approach was proposed which included the evaluation of a small number of modules in the first phase (in 2013) including modules from six faculties at the UFS including the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences, the Faculty of Education, the Faculty of the Humanities, the Faculty of Law, the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences and the Faculty of Theology. It was proposed that additional modules be included in 2014.

Institutional module evaluations were to be managed centrally by the module evaluation office located in DIRAP. This office would be responsible for practically administering module evaluations using the survey automation software, EvaSys. EvaSys is a web-based survey management system that enables online as well as paper-based surveys. The licence for the software was purchased by the UFS for the purpose of module evaluations and other institutional surveys. Although module evaluations were centrally administered, the institutional module evaluation project was positioned as an institutional project conducted as a partnership between faculties, DIRAP and CTL. As such, faculties were responsible for providing the module evaluation office with necessary information about which

survey method they preferred for evaluating their modules and they had to decide on when evaluation of their modules should take place (DIRAP & CTL, 2013). A detailed account of module evaluation procedures during the institutional module evaluation pilot is provided in Chapter 7 as this was the focus of this action research study.

An important aspect of the institutional module evaluation pilot was gathering input from module evaluation stakeholders, who were identified as students, lecturers, and TLMs throughout the pilot. The institutional module evaluation questionnaire was developed by including as many as possible questions that overlapped between faculty module evaluation questionnaires. Moreover, the draft institutional module evaluation questionnaire was distributed for comments to the Rector/Vice-Chancellor, Vice-Rector: Academic, as well as Deans, TLMs, programme directors, and academic staff. In addition, as part of the action research processes, feedback was sought from students, lecturers and TLMs on their experiences of module evaluations and to gather their recommendations for improving the institutional module evaluation system (DIRAP & CTL, 2013). The stakeholder feedback gathered from lecturers, students, and TLMs is discussed and analysed in depth in the results chapters of this dissertation (see Chapter 6, 7 and 8).

In the coming chapters the data gathered throughout the institutional module evaluation action research pilot will be presented and ultimately analysed by using systems thinking as a theoretical framework to understand module evaluations as a system at the UFS.

2.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have contextualised higher education first on an international level to show how key trends such as the massification and marketisation of higher education has led to the significant need for student feedback to be used as a mechanism to better understand the student learning experience. I then gave a brief historical background of South African higher education followed by the current context which highlighted the need for the enhancement of the quality of teaching and learning in

South African higher education institutions. On the basis of this need, arguments were presented for the importance of systematically gathering student feedback as part of quality enhancement processes in higher education institutions in South Africa. In the final section of this chapter, an overview of quality enhancement at the UFS is provided, followed by a background of how the institutional module evaluation pilot came to light at the UFS.

Chapter 3: An overview of module evaluation literature

"Student evaluations of a course are an essential metric of perceived effectiveness. Although subjective in nature, student evaluations yield invaluable data that can lead to major course improvements (Newton, Menna, & Tank, 2009, p. 44)".

3.1 Introduction

Teaching is one of the core functions of higher education institutions and therefore methods of meaningfully assessing both quality and subjective experience of teaching are essential. Module evaluations are commonly used to evaluate teaching at higher education institutions. In fact, Kember, et al. (2002) are of the opinion that it is perhaps the most broadly used method to evaluate teaching. Keane and Labhrainn (2005) go even further in suggesting that module evaluation questionnaires are probably the most extensively used instruments in higher education.

It is not surprising then that module evaluation is a widely researched topic including a range of themes such as the validity of instruments used for module evaluations, factors that influence student ratings, response rates of module evaluations, and different methods to deliver module evaluation. As such, it was important to consider the scope of this study in the review of the literature. Firstly, the main objective of this dissertation is to develop a framework for institutionalising a system for module evaluations at the UFS. The aspects of module evaluation that need to be investigated in a review of the literature need to be particularly focused on the module evaluation process, which is in effect more practically oriented. However, before an effective process can be put in place, it is necessary to have sufficient knowledge of the theory that underpins practice. With this borne in mind, the following themes, which are of most relevance to this specific study, will be considered in the coming sections in terms of module evaluation:

- Purpose of module evaluations;
- Module evaluation instruments;
- Online versus traditional delivery methods of module evaluations;
- Issues of module evaluation response rates;
- Module evaluation stakeholder experiences

3.2 Purpose of module evaluation

The purpose of collecting module evaluations depends wholly on the uses thereof and therefore varies from institution to institution. However, one universal purpose of collecting module evaluations, regardless of other uses that are specific to an institution, is to provide formative feedback to lecturing staff for improving the quality of their teaching. Module evaluations provide insight into the student learning experience, albeit subjective, which lecturers can use to understand their students and reflect on their teaching practice (Ravelli, 2000).

In addition to providing formative feedback to individual lecturers, module evaluations are often part of the quality assurance processes at universities (Kember et al., 2002; Marsh, 2007). Ursin, Huusko, Aittola, Kiviniemi, and Muhonen (2008, p.112) define quality assurance as: "procedures, systems and processes to foster and enhance the quality of an institution, its educational provision, and other operations". It is especially in the enhancement of the institutions 'educational provision' in terms of teaching and learning that module evaluations, as a form of student feedback, play a role. The role of module evaluation in quality assurance has been covered in more detail in Chapter 2 (see section 2.2.3).

In addition to providing feedback to lecturers on their teaching and playing a role in the quality assurance of universities, module evaluations provide a measure of teaching effectiveness for making personnel decisions (such as tenure and promotions). Moreover, they provide information to students for selecting courses, and provide an outcome or process description for research on teaching (Marsh, 2007). In order for module evaluations to serve these purposes, however, certain regulations and

procedures need to be in place at an institution so that module evaluations can be conducted as a systemic process.

For instance, results of the evaluations need to be shared with students for it to play a role in their course selection process. In a study by Howell and Symbaluk (2001) 396 staff members and 156 students were surveyed at a career and university-studies college in Canada to determine their views on publishing module evaluation results. They highlighted both positive and negative outcomes associated with publishing these results. A positive outcome may be that students can use these results to help them make decisions about which modules to select. On the other hand, it may bias subsequent module evaluations of the same module or instructor in future evaluations.

The same goes for module evaluations serving a purpose of being a measure of teaching effectiveness for personnel decisions - regulations, procedures and policies need to be in place to allow for it. Although using module evaluation results for personnel decisions has become increasingly acceptable (Richardson, 2005), there are still certain concerns related to using module evaluations for this purpose. Some of these concerns include that the results of module evaluations may often not be interpreted correctly within a sound theory of teaching effectiveness and that the pressure to ensure good ratings may lead to lecturers resorting to measures such as grading more leniently to win students' favor (Johnson, 2000; Zabaleta, 2007).

For module evaluations to serve a purpose as a component in quality assurance procedures at a university, the use of the results need to go beyond providing feedback to individual lecturers on the perceived effectiveness of their teaching. The overall effectiveness of teaching at a university should be monitored on broader levels. The results should thus be available in a format that supports monitoring of teaching effectiveness on broader levels, such as departmental, faculty and institutional levels. As a consequence, institutional research units at universities should thus typically also play a role in the institutional quality assurance procedures by using module evaluation results on these broader levels.

Additionally, there should be procedures in place that require an institution to use the results for this purpose. Marsh (2007, p.321) suggests that "the existence of a program of students' evaluations of teaching is typically considered as one requirement of a good university in quality assurance exercises". Although module evaluations serving a purpose as a constituent of quality assurance practices at universities is uncontested in the literature and despite the sense it makes theoretically, it is not always the case in practice. This means that despite a contribution to quality assurance being a logical purpose of module evaluations that, because of the lack of processes and procedures in place, module evaluations are not always *used* in a way that allows for them to support improvements in the quality of teaching and learning. It is therefore important that procedures be in place to reflect the purpose of module evaluations (Campbell & Bozeman, 2007; Gravestock & Gregor-Greenleaf, 2008). It is precisely these module evaluation procedures and processes that are the focus of this research.

3.3 Module evaluation instruments

Since module evaluations are a measure of teaching effectiveness for the main purpose of providing feedback to instructors on their teaching, it makes sense that a module evaluation questionnaire should measure dimensions of teaching effectiveness for it to be valid. However teaching is complex and multidimensional. Contextual influences, type of institution, and class sizes, to name a few, all influence how teaching effectiveness is understood. Evaluating teaching effectiveness thus requires a multidimensional and properly contextualised instrument (Marsh, 2007; Spooren, Mortelmans, & Denekens, 2007). Many valid and reliable module evaluation instruments have been developed over the years (Chonko, Tanner, & Davis, 2002; Marsh, 2007; Spencer & Schmelkin, 2002; Spooren et al., 2007). However, in this section I will give a brief overview of the two most well-known and widely used module evaluation instruments namely: The Students' Evaluations of Educational Quality (SEEQ) (Marsh, 1982) and the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) (Ramsden, 1991).

3.3.1 The Students' Evaluation of Educational Quality (SEEQ) and Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ)

The SEEQ is probably the most commonly used and established module evaluation instrument in the USA and according to Richardson (2005) the most widely used module evaluation instrument in published research. It has been developed based on psychometric analysis and consequently has strong psychometric properties with a high reliability[11] (r=0.88 to 0.97). There is also strong support in the literature for the construct and content validity of the instrument (Coffey & Gibbs, 2001; Marsh, 1982; Marsh, 2007; Richardson, 2005).

The SEEQ has most extensively been used in the USA as a module evaluation instrument, but it has also been deployed at various institutions in Australia, New Zealand and the UK (Richardson, 2005). In a comprehensive review of the literature on module evaluation instruments, Richardson (2005) also found examples of the SEEQ being shortened and adapted for various different contexts and that, when compared with in-house questionnaires at institutions, it often is found to be more reliable and valid and frequently even preferred by academics at these institutions.

The CEQ is used extensively in Australia, and more recently in the UK, to measure graduate students' perception and satisfaction with their courses. Where the SEEQ is useful in the evaluation of a single course, the main purpose of the CEQ is to compare ratings across institutions. The instrument is used through the Graduate Destination Survey in Australia where it is administered to all new graduates across the country (Richardson, 2005). It was designed to measure differences in aspects of teaching in different departments and faculties within institutions (Ramsden, 1991). It is, as was mentioned above, particularly useful in institutional benchmarking as it was developed with the intent to make comparisons within fields of study and across institutions (Tucker, Jones, & Straker, 2008). Although the CEQ was (unlike the SEEQ) not developed to provide feedback to individual instructors on singular modules, it has successfully been adapted for this purpose by various institutions and

[11] The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines reliability as "the extent to which an experiment, test, or measuring procedure yields the same results on repeated trials". Mars (2007, p.332) defines reliability as: "the extent of agreement between multiple items designed to measure the same underlying construct, using indexes such as coefficient alpha"

researchers (Richardson, 2005). The development of the CEQ was guided by the following specification criteria (paraphrased from Ramsden, 1991, p.6):

- To be inclusive of all important aspects of the quality of teaching about which students can form accurate judgments;
- The instrument should have a high degree of validity and be free from manipulation. This implies that it should be relevant to students, administered in a controlled manner, items and scales should be rigorously tested and that there should be adequate evidence of appropriate associations with student learning theories;
- Production and administration should be economical (the questionnaire should not be too long);
- Items which are not relevant in every discipline, for example items referring to teaching methods, should be excluded. In other words, the instrument should be applicable to all higher education courses;
- It should be possible to differentiate between student perceptions of academic courses at several levels of aggregation.

From these criteria, the intent to use the results of the CEQ at broader levels within an institution and across institutions for benchmarking, becomes clear. This shows, firstly, the importance of having a firm understanding of the purpose of module evaluations at an institution, and secondly, the need to develop a module evaluation instrument that is fit for the purpose of module evaluations at that institution.

Furthermore, the psychometric properties of the instrument have been found to be acceptable. The CEQ has proven construct, criterion and discriminant validity and satisfactory internal consistency of scales, but there is no evidence of test-retest reliability (Richardson, 2005). **Table 3.1** shows the scales of the SEEQ and the CEQ. The scales of the SEEQ were established based on the assumption that teaching effectiveness is multidimensional and should be measured by a multidimensional instrument (Marsh, 2007). The five scales on the CEQ are also based on research identifying them as a reflection of different dimensions of effective/ good quality teaching.

Table 3.1: Dimensions/ Scales of the SEEQ and the CEQ (adapted from Marsh, 2007 & Richardson, 2005).

Instrument	Dimensions/ Scales
Students' Evaluations of Educational Quality (SEEQ)	Instructor Enthusiasm Breadth of Coverage Organisation/ Clarity Assignments/ Readings Learning/ Value Examinations/ Grading Group Interaction Individual Rapport Workload/Difficulty
Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ)	Good Teaching Appropriate Assessment Appropriate Workload Clear Goals Generic Skills

The nine scales of the SEEQ were developed based on a literature review of multiple module evaluation instruments, together with lecturer and student interviews on what they understood around the term 'effective teaching'. In addition, apart from research focused on student responses to the SEEQ, which confirmed validity of the scales, the same nine factors (scales) were identified in research on lecturer self-evaluation of their own teaching (Marsh, 2007).

The five scales of the CEQ were developed based on previous research on the dimensions of effective teaching. These five scales were developed in accordance with the specified criteria (presented above) to allow for the instrument to be relevant to all higher education courses. This means that it is a more general measure of effective teaching, and also ensures that it is not too long – which further limits the number of scales which could be included in the instrument. Students have to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with each statement. In an attempt to counteract systematic response bias, half the items were stated positively, while the other half were stated negatively (Richardson, 2005).

Richardson (2005) notes in his literature review on instruments for obtaining student feedback, that a national trial of the CEQ was conducted in Australia which yielded usable responses from 3372 final-year undergraduate students from 13 Australian universities. Based on the results of the trial, it was

decided that the Graduate Careers Council of Australia (GCCA) should administer the CEQ on an annual basis to all new Australian university graduates. The survey has since been administered to thousands of graduates and the usability of the CEQ for institutional benchmarking has been well-established. However, Richardson (2005) cautions that although the CEQ is useful for comparing students' overall course experience, it is not intended to be used to provide feedback to individual lecturers. If the CEQ is to be used for the evaluation of individual courses, it needs to be adapted for this purpose. Therefore, the SEEQ is more suitable for the evaluation of individual modules.

3.3.2 Single item versus multiple item measuring

Spooren et al. (2007) warns against measuring skills on single-item levels, in other words measuring teaching quality with a single question. Single-item measuring has methodological limitations. One of the reasons for this is that even if two respondents have the same attitude toward an aspect of teaching quality (for instance, the preparedness of a lecturer for class) it is possible that their responses to the question may differ due to a difference in the way that they interpret the question. This leads to the ambiguous interpretation of results and increases the possibility of accidental fluctuations in the results. If more items measure the same quality, a more accurate insight into the specific quality that is being measured is provided. It is furthermore also difficult to estimate the measuring properties of single-item measures due to insufficient information which makes testing the reliability and validity of these items difficult (Spooren et al., 2007). Based on these limitations it is thus suggested that several items be included to measure different aspects of a single teaching quality.

Marsh (2007, p.332) warns against poorly constructed module evaluation instruments:

> *"...many poorly constructed student evaluation surveys fail to provide a comprehensive multidimensional evaluation, thus undermining their usefulness, particularly for diagnostic feedback. "Home-made" SET [student evaluation of teaching] surveys constructed by lecturers themselves, or by committees, are particularly susceptible to such deficiencies, and compounded by the likelihood that aspects of teaching excluded from the survey are those which tend to be the most neglected in practice".*

It is hence important to consider not only the multidimensional nature of teaching effectiveness in the development of a module evaluation instrument, but also to develop the instrument through a rigorous process that includes calculations of scale reliability. In addition, appropriately adapting the instrument for its intended use is necessary in the development of a module evaluation instrument.

3.3.3 Instruments across disciplines

Based on his review of instruments for obtaining student feedback Richardson (2005) suggests that using a single instrument that is applicable across various disciplines is feasible and perhaps even preferable. Meaningful comparisons can be made across departments and faculties within an institution by using a single instrument. A useful example of this is the GCCA administering the CEQ annually to all new graduates through the Graduate Destination Survey (Richardson, 2005). This means that comparisons could even be made across institutions (Kember et al., 2002; Tucker et al., 2008) and that national level data is available.

3.4 Online versus traditional module evaluations

Traditionally, module evaluations have been administered using a paper-and-pencil (hardcopy) format. Students usually completed evaluations in the classroom near the end of a semester. Recently, online evaluations have, however, become increasingly popular in higher education. One reason for this is the growing use and influences of technology in higher education (also see section 2.1 of the previous chapter) (Stowell, Addison, & Smith, 2012). Both hardcopy and online methods have been investigated in various comparative studies in the literature (Avery, Bryant, Mathios, Kang, & Bell, 2006; Dommeyer, Baum, Hanna, & Chapman, 2004; Donovan, Mader, & Shinsky, 2006, 2007; Stowell et al., 2012). A summary of the main findings from this literature will be covered in this section.

Many higher education institutions have started evaluating their modules online due to the advantages associated with online evaluations compared to traditional methods. The influence that changing from

traditional delivery methods to an online method can have on the module evaluation process has been well documented (Stowell et al., 2012). One of the biggest advantages of online evaluation is cost savings. Apart from printing costs, the cost of distributing, collecting, scanning and capturing open-ended questions are avoided in the employment of an online method (Dommeyer et al., 2004). Additionally online evaluation results can be produced in a considerably shorter time period. Where it could take weeks or even months to provide instructors with module evaluation results produced by the traditional paper-based method, depending on data capture method, online evaluation results can be made available within days (Donovan et al., 2007).

Moreover, some authors argue that online evaluations are less susceptible to lecturer influences than classroom-based methods (Donovan et al., 2006). In many institutions, lecturers are present during the evaluation, even if independent third parties are responsible for the distribution and collection of questionnaires. The mere presence of the lecturer may influence student ratings, especially if students fear that the lecturer will be able to identify their responses (Dommeyer et al., 2004). Online evaluations are also more flexible. Students can complete the questionnaires at a time that is suitable to them and unlike classroom-based evaluations without any time constraints, such as needing to rush to the next class, for example (Donovan et al., 2007). Several studies have reported that students are more inclined to write longer and more comprehensive comments online than on paper (Ballantyne, 2003; Dommeyer et al., 2004; Stowell et al., 2012) which can lead to more effective feedback. In addition, online systems also allow for more flexibility in the design of the questionnaire as complicated skipping and branching options[12] can be included in online questionnaires (Dommeyer et al., 2004).

One disadvantage of online evaluations is that it requires students to have computer access (Donovan et al., 2006). Online evaluations are usually completed by students in their own time, which contributes to the flexibility of the online method. However, it may also prevent some students from participating in the evaluations, which may ultimately lead to decreased response rates and biased

[12] Skipping and branching options, sometimes also called ‘skip logic’ or ‘conditional branching’ allow one to include or exclude certain questions in the questionnaire based on the responses of the survey respondents. For example, certain questions may only be applicable to first generation students. Skipping and branching options will then only make those questions available to respondents who indicated that they were first-generation students as a response to an earlier question in the questionnaire.

results. This is also a challenge at the UFS, as will be seen in the presentation of the results in chapter 7 (see section 7.2.2.1 and section 7.3.1.5). In contrast, if students are given an opportunity to complete module evaluations in class where a specific period of time is allocated for module evaluations, students are less likely to ignore or forget about completing the evaluations. Despite many advantages associated with online evaluations, many institutions experience resistance from staff when transitioning from traditional to online module evaluations and lower response rates add to this resistance (Dommeyer et al., 2004).

Resistance to online evaluations by lecturers is well documented (Crews & Curtis, 2011; Dommeyer, Baum, Chapman, & Hanna, 2002; Dommeyer et al., 2004; Donovan et al., 2007). In addition to a concern about response rates, studies by Stowell et al. (2012) and Crews and Curtis (2011), that both explore staff perspectives of online module evaluations, identify other factors that underwrite staff resistance to online evaluations. Stowell et al. (2012) suggest that when module evaluations are completed outside the classroom, instructors may feel uneasy because there is no control over the conditions under which evaluations are completed. Students can influence one another while completing the evaluations or students that never attend class can complete the evaluations. Moreover, lecturers are often worried that dissatisfied students will complete online evaluations, while satisfied students will not, resulting in lower overall quantitative ratings with the online method (Crews & Curtis, 2011).

However, as Dommeyer et al. (2002, p.456) note: "The politics of changing an evaluation system at the university may be more a function of prior beliefs by faculty, rather than the outcome of careful research". Although research exists that corroborates the notion that online evaluations often yield lower response rates than traditional evaluations (Donovan et al., 2006; Stowell et al., 2012), the employment of an online learning management system (LMS) may increase response rates. One reason for this may be that students already use the LMS to access study material and information about the course. If there is a link to a module evaluation survey and a message on the LMS that reminds students to complete the evaluations, it may increase response rates (Oliver & Sautter, 2005).

Furthermore, little difference has been reported in quantitative ratings (Dommeyer et al., 2004; Donovan et al., 2006; Sorenson & Reiner, 2003; Stowell et al., 2012). While the main limitation of online module evaluations appears to be lower response rates, the evaluation method does not seem to have an effect on the overall ratings of a module. Additionally, various strategies can be implemented to increase response rates such as providing incentives to students for completing evaluations or even by announcing the timing of surveys explicitly (Stowell et al., 2012) (also see section 3.5.3 of this chapter for literature-based strategies to improve response rates).

3.5 Response rates

Module evaluation response rates and the issues surrounding this have been covered widely in the literature. As such, in the following sections, an overview is provided of some of these debates. A discussion of the need for adequate response rates, response rates of online module evaluations versus paper-based module evaluations and strategies identified in the literature for increasing response rates follow below.

3.5.1 Adequate response rates

As was mentioned earlier, when it comes to module evaluations, response rates are an issue of concern, especially for lecturers. However, there do not seem to be clear guidelines in the literature stipulating what an adequate response rate should be. Nulty (2008) noted that whether a response rate is adequate, depends on how module evaluations are used. If the primary use of the results is to provide formative feedback to instructors the response rate should not be the main concern. If only a single student provides feedback that can be used to bring about improvement in a module, then the purpose has, strictly speaking, been served, or at least been served to an extent. However, the concern with response rates usually comes into play when the results are used to make decisions that affect lecturers' careers. Module evaluations are often used for promotions and appointments and therefore poor evaluations can have a negative effect on a lecturer's career. Consequently, it is understandable

that response rates should be adequate if they are to be used as a basis for important personnel decisions.

Additionally, Richardson (2005) emphasises the importance of response rates of module evaluations by noting that if conclusions are to be drawn based on data, and in this case especially conclusions that influence a person's career, all efforts should be made to ensure the accuracy of the conclusions. Interpretations based on data can be inaccurate when sampling error or sampling bias exists. In module evaluations, sampling error arises when the responses from students that complete the questionnaire differ from those who do not complete the questionnaire. In other words, the responses are not similar to what the responses of the entire population would be. However, the higher the response rate the smaller the magnitude of sampling error. Sampling bias exists if the characteristics of the sample differ from the characteristics of the population as a whole. Students that complete module evaluations often have different demographic characteristics from those who choose not to complete module evaluations. Responders differ from non-responders in their attitudes and behaviour as well. Responses are thus different from what the responses would be if the non-responders had completed the evaluations (Richardson, 2005). For example, there is some evidence to indicate that students that are satisfied with the quality of the module, for instance, may be less inclined to complete the evaluations (Crews & Curtis, 2011). Non-responders in this example, therefore, differ from responders in their attitude toward the module. Hence, the results obtained may not be an accurate picture of the module if the group of non-responders is too large (and hence the response rate is low).

Nulty (2008) notes that sample bias can be introduced in various ways (also see Lavrakas, 2008). The method of evaluation can play a vital role in sampling bias. If the traditional method is employed, timing may cause sampling bias. A lecturer may choose to evaluate the module at a time when it is known that only the most conscientious students will attend class. Their attitudes are likely to differ systematically from students who only attend class when it is known that that examination or test tips will be given (such as in the class just before a test for instance). Sample bias can also be introduced when evaluations are done online. Online responders are demographically different from other

respondents as they are the respondents with access to internet-capable devices and they are also the respondents who are comfortable enough with technology to complete the questionnaire online (Watt, Simpson, McKillop, & Nunn, 2002). Thus, respondents' views may differ from non-respondents because their attitudes and behaviours are different. In a similar way, differences in expressed views may also exist between responders of paper surveys and responders of online surveys (Nulty, 2008).

The larger the sample the more representative the results are of the entire population. The question remains, how much are we willing to accept? Dillman (2000) provides a formula to calculate the necessary number of responses based on the size of the population specifically for module evaluations. As it is well-known that it is difficult to obtain response rates of 70% or higher (Nulty, 2008) in module evaluations, Dillman (2000) calculated the necessary number of respondents based on lenient conditions. Firstly, this meant that 10% sampling error instead of the normal 3% was set. Secondly, the assumption that yes/no questions were to be answered equally (50:50 ratio) by respondents were made. Thirdly, an 80% confidence level would be acceptable, which is lower than the 95% required by statisticians. However, it is known that students are more inclined to use top ratings in module evaluations (for instance, when agreeing with the positive statements). To prevent this, the 50:50 ratio can be altered to a nominal 70:30 split of responses 4 or 5 compared to responses 1,2 or 3 on 5-point scale questions (if response 1 is positive and response 5 is negative) (Nulty, 2008). The required responses by population size (total number of students enrolled for the module) based on these more liberal conditions set by Dillman (2000) and the altered 70:30 nominal split are compared to the traditional, strict conditions in **Table 3.2**.

Table 3.2: Required response rate by population size (where the population is considered to be the entire class/ group of students that are enrolled for the module) (Nulty, 2008, p.310).

	Lenient conditions		Strict conditions	
Population size	**Nr of responses required**	**Response rate required**	**Nr of responses required**	**Response rate required**
10	7	75%	10	100%
20	12	58%	19	97%
30	14	48%	29	96%
40	16	40%	38	95%
50	17	35%	47	93%

	Lenient conditions		Strict conditions	
Population size	**Nr of responses required**	**Response rate required**	**Nr of responses required**	**Response rate required**
60	18	31%	55	92%
70	19	28%	64	91%
80	20	25%	72	90%
90	21	23%	80	88%
100	21	21%	87	87%
150	23	15%	123	82%
200	23	12%	155	77%
250	24	10%	183	73%
300	24	8%	209	70%
500	25	5%	289	58%
750	25	2%	358	48%
1000	26	3%	406	41%
2000	26	1%	509	25%

When considering the guidelines in **Table 3.2** concerns may be raised in terms of the response rate indicated as adequate based on lenient conditions. This is the case, especially in classes with more than 200 students enrolled where only 23 responses (for classes with 200 students) to 26 responses (for classes with 2000 students) are deemed acceptable. Therefore, further research into specifically a higher education context is necessary in order to determine whether data will reach saturation point with so few responses and to confirm that these guidelines are appropriate.

It is important to note that not many authors in the literature commit themselves to specifying adequate response rates for module evaluations that can generally be applied to all institutions. This is due to the many factors that may influence response rates such as the method of the evaluation and the number of students enrolled in a module and to the uniqueness of the evaluation process and culture in each institution. The guidelines in **Table 3.2** may be useful as a point of departure in establishing adequate response rates at an institution. It may be necessary, however, to do additional research in the context of the institution to determine when data reaches a saturation point and base determining adequate response rates on the findings of such research.

3.5.2 Response rates of online evaluations versus response rates of paper evaluations

Several studies in the literature compare response rates of online module evaluations and paper-based evaluations. In their study of seven Economics courses evaluated over a period of four years

employing both online and paper-based methods of delivery, Avery et al. (2006) found that paper-based evaluations yielded higher response rates in each course. In another study, Stowell et al. (2012) divided 22 courses into two sections, evaluating one section online and the other on paper. A total of 1041 students were enrolled for sections evaluated online and 1016 students were enrolled for the sections that were evaluated with paper-based delivery. The sections evaluated by the hardcopy method obtained response rates that were statistically, significantly higher than the sections evaluated electronically. Hardcopy evaluations had a response rate of 81.5% while the online response rate was 61.4%.

Similarly, in their review of the literature, Dommeyer et al. (2004) suggest that one of the biggest disadvantages of online module evaluations is low response rates. This also seems to be a factor hampering the adoption of online evaluations in institutions which are in the process of switching over to online evaluations or incorporating online evaluations as a new method of evaluating modules. There are, however, some studies that found no statistical difference between response rates of online and paper delivery methods of module evaluations. Leung and Kember (2005) found no difference in response rates regardless of delivery mode of module evaluations in their study of response rates across seven faculties with a sample size of 2786.

It should also be kept in mind that although the literature suggests that online evaluations generally yield lower response rates, the majority of studies comparing online response rates with traditional paper-pencil evaluations, were conducted in the late 1990's and early 2000s. Hakstian (2010) suggests that limited access to computers and the internet, as well as relative unfamiliarity with technology may have played a role in the low response rates of online evaluations at this time. Access to and familiarity with technology have improved since then. Furthermore, online response rates may increase over time. Although higher response rates were obtained for paper evaluations in the study mentioned earlier by Avery et al. (2006) the online response rates did improve over the four year period of the study. Ballantyne (2003) also found that online response rates can be improved by implementing promotion or marketing strategies. The next section deals with strategies for improving response rates.

3.5.3 Increasing response rates

Given the importance of response rates numerous authors propose various strategies for increasing response rates of module evaluations. Ravelli (2000) reports that students often do not consider module evaluations to be beneficial to them but that they may think it possible to benefit the next group of students. More students may be likely to complete the evaluations if they think that it may benefit them directly. Therefore, Ravelli (2000) proposes more frequent, or at least, earlier than the traditional end-of-course, module evaluations to enable instructors to give feedback to students on module evaluation results when the course is still running.

Ballantyne (2003) and Crews and Curtis (2011) state that lecturers should provide ongoing encouragement to students to complete module evaluations. Lecturers should explain to students the value and use of module evaluations and continuously encourage them to complete the evaluations (in the case of online evaluations that are accessible for a period of time). Incentives are another common method used to increase response rates. A lucky draw for a prize, a small grade incentive, withholding grades and extra credit are examples of incentives that have been used (Crews & Curtis, 2011; Dommeyer et al., 2004). However, there is a concern about the quality of the responses when incentives are introduced. Students may only complete the evaluation for the incentive without putting much thought into their responses which then raises questions about the validity of the results.

Nulty (2008) suggests conducting classes in a computer laboratory to allow students to complete online surveys. This will incorporate all the advantages yielded by traditional methods in terms of cost and time savings, with the added benefit of response rates. This option is of course limited to class sizes appropriate for the number of computers available at an institution, and computer laboratory time tabling constraints.

3.6 Stakeholder experiences

The process of module evaluations involves several actors in the higher education space. In this study, module evaluation stakeholders refer to those that have an influence on the module evaluation process (administrators), those that play a role in the module and are being evaluated (lecturers) and those that complete the evaluations (students). In other words, stakeholders in this context refer to all persons who influence and who are influenced by module evaluations.

Even though it is a widely researched topic, most research in relation to module evaluations focuses on the reliability and validity of instruments used, factors that influence students' ratings of courses, uses of module evaluations and common instruments used in the evaluation of modules. However, not much of the voluminous research existing on module evaluations focuses on the experiences and views these stakeholders of the overall process. Moreover, there is a particular gap in the literature about these views and experiences in the South African context. As such, this study is timely and can contribute to current discussions about student feedback and quality enhancement. In the next two subsections, the literature on lecturer and student experiences is analysed.

3.6.1 Lecturer experiences

Many researchers support the use of module evaluations and find them valid and useful (Abrami, d' Apollonia, & Rosenfield, 2007; Johnson, 2000; Marsh, 2007; Zabaleta, 2007). However, studies that have explored lecturer views of module evaluations often report negative attitudes towards these evaluations. Although many of these studies are based on anecdotal reports, some examples exist of findings based on empirical research (Beran & Rokosh, 2007).

Negative attitudes toward module evaluations appear to be brought on because of two main reasons: taking negative feedback personally and the potential module evaluations have to influence a lecturer's career. Gravestock and Gregor-Greenleaf (2008) note that module evaluations can be a source of anxiety and negativity for lecturers. Lecturers invest time and energy in their teaching and it

is understandable that poor ratings or undesirable feedback may instil negative emotions such as disappointment, anger or even despondency. This may lead to a complete distrust of the system and disregard of the feedback (Hodges & Stanton, 2006). Kogan, Schoenfeld-Tacher and Hellyer (2010) also found that feedback from students is not always constructive and can lead to anxiety and loss of confidence of lecturers.

Campbell and Bozeman (2007) reported that the results of module evaluations are often not used, as intended, to enhance teaching effectiveness. Reasons for this include that lecturers distrust the process, are not convinced of the adequacy of the instrument used for module evaluations and because of ambiguous protocols and guidelines in the use of the results. McKimm (2008, p.207) notes that "good feedback does not in itself result in better teaching". Specialist help may be required to interpret and analyse findings of standardised questionnaires. Furthermore, McKimm (2008) argues that improvements in teaching and learning based on student feedback are more likely if lecturers can draw on the help of experts in analysing and using their module evaluation results.

Many institutions use module evaluation results for summative purposes including making decisions about appointment, retention and promotion. Considering the potential impact module evaluations can have on a lecturer's career, some apprehension toward it is not surprising. A concern about response rates, which was discussed in the previous section of this chapter, plays a role in this apprehension. This is because it can be argued that results are not valid and not necessarily representative of the entire class if response rates are insufficient (Nulty, 2008; Richardson, 2005). As such, instructors tend to prefer traditional methods of evaluation (paper-based methods) as these have proven to produce higher response rates than online evaluations (Crews & Curtis, 2011).

Further institutions may be "overly" reliant on module evaluations, especially where personnel decisions are concerned (Chan, Luk, & Zeng, 2014). A study by Nasser and Fresko (2002) found that lecturers do not believe that module evaluations should be used for administrative decision-making and that HoDs should not even be entitled to have access to results. Even researchers that advocate for summative uses of module evaluations warn against using them in isolation (Marsh, 2007).

Recommendations for the mitigation of staff resistance to module evaluations include using module evaluation results in addition to class observations, peer-evaluations, self-evaluations and teaching portfolios (Kogan et al., 2010).

Many institutions publish module evaluation results in the interest of transparency, providing students with feedback, and to provide students with information to aid them in the selection of modules. A study by Howell and Symbaluk (2001), however, found that lecturers are not in favor of this practice because they feel that their privacy is jeopardised and because of a concern of the inaccuracy of ratings. This resistance to the publication of results can be countered if individual lecturer names are not made public with the results. However, the practicality of this should be well thought through because if a course or module name is given then the identity of a lecturer can sometimes be deduced.

Despite many accounts in the literature about staff negativity toward module evaluations, studies reporting positive attitudes do also exist. Studies by Beran, Violato and Kline (2007) and Beran, Violato, Kline and Frideres (2005) found lecturers to be positively disposed toward module evaluations. Instructors included in their studies indicated that they do not find module evaluations to be intrusive. Additionally they did not find them a waste of time and they did not think they were an inappropriate means of assessment. Moreover, they believed that evaluation results were being used appropriately by administrators. Similarly, Kogan et al. (2010) noted that many lecturers find module evaluations useful, pay attention to them and use them to assess their teaching.

It appears that much of the negativity that surrounds module evaluations can be alleviated if appropriate policies and procedures are in place to guide the use of module evaluations. Lecturers may be less anxious about it if they were certain that progression in their careers did not solely depend on module evaluation results. It is important that institutions have an overarching evaluation system in place in which module evaluations only constitute one part (Alderman, Towers, & Bannah, 2012).

3.6.2 Student experiences

Research on student experiences of module evaluations is limited. Most studies that do focus on these experiences draw on small samples, often from one institution (Gravestock & Gregor-Greenleaf, 2008). Since students are most likely to benefit from module evaluation (by the enhancement of their teaching and learning experiences should evaluations be used to improve instruction), it is sensible to understand their experiences of the process. It would be constructive because students are a central part of the teaching process and their views are seldom incorporated into curriculum and teaching and learning discussions (Sojka, Gupta, & Deeter-schmelz, 2002). Most studies that do exist on student experiences of module evaluations suggest that students are generally more positive about these evaluations than lecturers (Gravestock & Gregor-Greenleaf, 2008).

Based on the available research, students appear to perceive the module evaluation process as valid and useful and they believe themselves to be appropriate evaluators of teaching effectiveness. They believe that module evaluations are important, that they should be completed and that lecturers should have access to the results (Campbell & Bozeman, 2007; Spencer & Schmelkin, 2002). Heine and Maddox (2009) found that students generally take the process seriously and feel comfortable completing the evaluations honestly, even if they have experienced the module less positively (p.8):

> *"Faculty should feel secure in the fact that, in general, students do take the process seriously (despite the misperceptions of some), and feel comfortable with giving a professor a poor evaluation. With all the professional rancour and inconclusive research on exactly what is measured with SET [student evaluations of teaching], at least our data suggests that students bring a fair amount of authenticity to the process"*

Two studies on student preference of evaluation methods indicate that students are likely to prefer online evaluations. Reasons for this include the flexibility the method offers in terms of location and timing and that students perceive the online method to be more anonymous (Donovan et al., 2007). Anonymity provided by online methods, it seems, is important to students (Dommeyer et al., 2004).

A study by Sojka et al. (2002) compares student and lecturer perceptions of module evaluations and reports distinct differences in the views of these two stakeholder groups. The students that participated in this study were sceptical about the use of course evaluations and were not very likely to perceive or experience changes made as a result of evaluations. Where lecturers believe they can improve their ratings by marking more leniently and by being more entertaining, students are less likely to agree with these statements. Furthermore, lecturers report making changes to their classes based on the module evaluation results, but students do not perceive any changes based upon their comments. Other studies (Gravestock & Gregor-Greenleaf, 2008; Spencer & Schmelkin, 2002) also report that students are unsure of how module evaluations are used and are, in fact, not certain that they are used at all. This may be due to the timing of module evaluations which McKimm (2008) cautions, should be carefully considered. Module evaluations are often conducted at the end of a module, usually on the grounds that students should have experienced all aspects of the module before they can be in a position to evaluate it. A negative consequence of this practice is that the concerns students raise in their feedback cannot be addressed in time for them to derive any benefit from it. McKimm (2008) warns that this is likely to undermine students' interest in providing meaningful feedback.

Since students are more likely to participate in the module evaluation process if they think that the outcomes of the process will be beneficial to them (Chen & Hoshower, 2003), efforts should be made by institutions to at least convince students that the evaluations are used. Nulty (2008) suggests that response rates (student participation) will increase if students are persuaded that their input is valued and that it will be used to improve the quality of instruction they receive.

3.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have attempted to cover the themes relevant to my specific topic in the vast literature on module evaluations. It is firstly important to understand the purposes of module evaluations at an institution in order to design procedures to achieve these purposes. The most commonly used module evaluation instruments internationally, the SEEQ and the CEQ, and the development and uses of both,

were discussed. This was followed by the advantages and disadvantages of different module evaluation delivery methods. The importance and calculation of an adequate response rate, the response rates different delivery methods yield, and strategies for increasing response rates were then examined. The chapter concluded with a review of the literature on stakeholder experiences of module evaluations. In the subsequent chapters the module evaluation themes highlighted in this chapter, will be empirically explored.

Chapter 4: Systems thinking: a theoretical framework

> *"Systems thinking is a style of thinking that attends as much to the connections between things as to the things themselves, and to the connections between things and their wider context, and looks at things and their connections from more than one perspective" (Armson, 2011, p.288).*

In the preceding chapters, the importance of an effective module evaluation system, with clear policies and procedures, was highlighted as one important way in which teaching and learning quality can be assessed and improved. The literature reviewed on module evaluations highlights the many elements at play, the multiple stakeholders involved, as well as the complex and sometimes 'messy' connections between these elements, within the broader institutional context. Interestingly, no examples of studies on module evaluations explicitly using systems thinking were found in the literature review, which implies that this is a new theoretical approach for module evaluation work. As such in this chapter, I provide an introduction to systems thinking, as the theoretical framework underpinning the study. The following sections provide an overview of systems thinking, its application within higher education research, as well as its application to the specific UFS context. In the final section, I provide an argument for how systems thinking can inform the development of a module evaluation process at the UFS.

4.1 Introduction to systems thinking

Systems thinking was developed from General Systems Theory (GST) which was developed by Ludwig von Bertalanffy in the 1940s. Von Bertalanffy, a biologist, developed GST when he considered the inadequacies of reductionist thinking and practice that were characteristic of other

biologists of that time. He argued that reductionism, which breaks things into parts and studies them separately, analysing each part as a separate entity, prevents one from understanding the thing in its entirety. 'The whole is greater than the sum of its parts' is a common expression used to describe the holistic view which systems thinking adopts (Von Bertalanffy, 1972).

The Online Oxford Dictionary (1989) defines a system as "a set of things working together as parts of a mechanism or an interconnecting network; a complex whole". The importance of understanding a system as comprising various parts working together as a 'whole' is emphasised in this definition as well as in the many other definitions of a system that exist in the literature. Checkland (2012, p.466) argues that the following four concepts are central to understanding the definition of a system:

1. A system may be a part of a larger system, making the first system a sub-system of the larger system. The original system may simultaneously be a larger system to various other smaller sub-systems. This creates a hierarchy of systems and the levels of the hierarchy are defined by the individual who is making use of the concept.

2. In order to accomplish change to a system communication is necessary between the parts of a system and the system and its environment. This communication monitors performance and will determine whether an intervention needs to take place to make a change to the system.

3. If a decision is made to take action in order to accomplish a change to the system, control processes need to be in place that act in response to effects the environment can have on the system as well as to the effects parts of the system can have on each other that can possibly cause internal failure.

4. Emergent properties need to exist and be definable. Emergent properties only exist in relation to an entirety (not in the parts that make up the whole). The example that Checkland (2012) uses is that of a bicycle. Emergent properties do not exist in the parts that are used to assemble a bicycle but once a bicycle has been built by assembling the parts it has the emergent property of 'vehicular potential'. As is shown below, a similar argument applies in the context of module evaluations.

Ison (2008) further makes a distinction between the concepts ‘systemic’ and ‘systematic’. One who focuses on the connections or relationships between the different parts of the whole is being systemic, while one who works in a step-by-step manner is being systematic. He argues that if a systems thinking approach is followed in an attempt to change or improve situations it is necessary to be both systemic and systematic. Systemic concepts, such as non-linear processes, should be understood before the dynamics of a system can be reconsidered in the process of managing the complexity of a system. Thus, in order for a system to change, the dynamics of the system need to change – which involves being systematic. A prerequisite for being systematic, however, is the ability to have systemic awareness.

4.1.1 Underlying assumptions of systems thinking

Systems thinking incorporates various underlying assumptions which are at the root of understanding it as a theoretical and practical approach to problem solving. Dent and Umpleby (1998) provide a helpful summary of the key underlying assumptions. These are discussed below, drawing on other authors to complement Dent and Umpleby (1998) as relevant.

Holism

This is the assumption that something can best be understood as a whole. The whole has “characteristics that belong to the system as a whole and don’t belong to any of its parts” (Dent & Umpleby citing Clemson, 1984, p.24). Furthermore, a system as a whole is also a subsystem of a bigger system. Holism requires the ability to have a big picture view of a system. In a way, this means stepping back, without getting caught up in the intricacies of the parts that make up the entity.

Relationships

Relationships between a system and its environment as well as other systems are at the heart of systems thinking. When a systems thinking approach is followed, particular emphasis is placed on the interconnections between the parts of a system that make up the system as well as the system’s connection with other bigger systems of which it is a part.

Environment

The environment in which a system exists always has an influence on the functioning of the system. There are certain conditions under which a rule applies. If the rule applies in all conditions, the environment does not have an influence on the effect that a rule has. Therefore, understanding the environment in which a system operates is essential if one is to understand the system and the workings thereof. Before any improvements can be made to a system, the influence the environment will have on the effects of the changes or improvements needs to be considered. In addition, the effects that the system changes have on the environment should be kept in mind.

Interdeterminism

The assumption of interdeterminism suggests that it is not always possible to predict which direction change will take. The opposite of this is the assumption that exact conclusions can be drawn if variables are known. Interdeterminism is thus the acknowledgement of unpredictability of the effects that interventions of a system may have. It emphasises the complexity of systems thinking and the importance of preparing for unexpected consequences. Ison (2008) suggests that understanding 'unintended consequences' and 'counterintuitive effects' are prerequisites for systemic awareness. This also means that it is possible to change a part of the system to address a problem that appears to be in another part of the system (Burns, 2014).

Causality

The assumption within systems thinking is that causality is circular rather than linear. Linear causality simply means that one event caused another, in which case the second event is the consequence of the first event. The second event is thus the end of the process. Circular causality is rather a series of events, each taking place as a consequence of the previous event, but instead of ending with a final event (as is the case with linear causality), the last event affects the first event again and so it continues. Circular causality also implies that the direction of change might be unexpected since it is not always obvious at the outset how each event will affect the other.

Observation

Observations are not regarded as objective. Instead, the observations of a given observer are dependent on his/her perception which is shaped by the person's unique history and experiences and position in relation to the system. Furthermore, the observer's worldview enables him/her to construct meaning and interpretation of observations that are made. It is thus not possible to entirely remove the observer from the observation. Is also necessary to understand observations as results of a combination of the unique perspective of the observer and what is being observed.

These principles are relevant to systems thinking irrespective of the discipline in which it is applied. Given the discussion of the module evaluation literature in Chapter 3, the value of applying these principles to the specific case of module evaluations is evident. In Chapter 8 these principles will also be applied to module evaluations at the UFS. However, before moving on to the module evaluations more specifically, it is important to review what we can learn from other higher education contexts in which systems thinking has been applied. It is to this topic that we now turn.

4.2 Systems thinking in higher education

The traditional hierarchical organisational structures of universities, commonly characterised by functional silos, often lead to a lack of integration across the institution. In contrast, systems thinking approaches to management recognise that changes in one area of a university impacts other areas of the university and that a more holistic view is needed to achieve organisational effectiveness (Furst-Bowe, 2011). If an institutional goal is, for instance, to increase student enrolment, resources must be adequately deployed to the marketing, admissions and financial aid departments (amongst others) to achieve the goal. Similarly, Furst-Bowe (2011) notes that an increased focus on student satisfaction, an emphasis on increasing accessibility to higher education, and rapid technological advances create a need for improvement of the quality of higher education (see Chapter 2). These factors require change

in all aspects of higher education, including academic programme offerings, support services and administrative areas, and so, systems thinking is essential. Despite the potential value that systems thinking can add to higher education, a literature search[13] revealed that the application of systems thinking to understand higher education issues appear to be in its infancy. Some of the most relevant studies applying systems thinking to shed light on higher education issues are briefly discussed below.

In their two-volume book on applying theory to understand and address commonly experienced challenges in higher education institutions, Bess and Dee (2012), deal with systems thinking in considerable detail as an appropriate theoretical underpinning for the effective management of universities. According to these authors, four of the main levels of organisational challenges universities must come to terms with include environmental, structural, interpersonal, and cultural challenges. These challenges are briefly described below (Bess & Dee, 2012, p.3).

Environmental challenges

In order to secure continued financial support universities need to be responsive to their external environments. Higher education institutions thus face the challenge of meeting specific economic and social needs such as producing graduates with a variety of skills to contribute to the knowledge economy (also see section 2.1 in Chapter 2) while simultaneously providing developmental education for underprepared students. Universities' internal operations need to be responsive to its increasingly complex external environment. The environmental challenge, therefore, is to determine how a university can be effectively responsive to its external environment without wasting its resources in attempting to "become all things to all people".

Structural challenges

Universities are typically divided into numerous academic departments or divisions where staff members are required to have specialised expertise in their academic disciplines. Although specialisation enables higher education institutions to aggregate a wide range of skills into functional

[13] A search with the key words 'systems thinking' or 'systems theory' and 'higher education' or 'university' or 'tertiary education' in Google Scholar and EBSCOhost Web (multiple databases) was conducted.

work units, it also makes the coordination of separated units more difficult. Uncoordinated units may develop overlapping programs leading to redundancy or develop programs with cross-purposes which can diminish the overall effectiveness of the institution. The structural challenge is thus to find ways to coordinate mechanisms across the institution which integrates outputs of separate groups without having a bearing on the work of specialists.

Interpersonal challenges

Organisational members of universities (leadership management, academics, students, support services) are individuals with a wide range of skills and with diverse roles and responsibilities. A key to organisational success is organisational members with high levels of motivation and commitment. The interpersonal challenge is consequently to not only understand the interpersonal side of the organisation, but to address the needs of a wide variety of organisation members.

Cultural challenges

Organisational cultures in universities are generated through their values and through their events and academic traditions. A university's organisational culture is important in providing a sense of stability and consistency in times of crisis as the members pull together towards common values. If the organisational culture is too closed, however, it may lead to a too homogenised educational experience that can suppress innovation. The cultural challenge is thus to create a supportive and inclusive culture that is also open enough to encourage the expression of diverse beliefs and values.

In order to address the organisational challenges described above, systemic thinking is necessary. The central premise of systems theory, that change in one part of a system impacts on other parts of the system, is applied in the university context in Bess and Dee's book. Some of the key principles, concerning the components and dynamics of a system, are discussed in more detail in section 4.3 of this chapter and specifically applied to the UFS. Before turning to the UFS specifically, the application of systems thinking in specific higher education case studies is briefly discussed below.

Firmly grounded in systems theory principles, the University of Wisconsin-Stout (UW-Stout) has developed a culture of continuous improvement through which key performance results have been sustained. This is despite changes within the university system itself, including changing student demographics and a high turnover in key leadership positions. UW-Stout has managed to continue to reach performance goals such as increasing student enrolment, closing the achievement gap between majority and minority students, and increasing the number of students who participate in experiential learning programmes. This has been achieved by applying systems theory principles in their quality management system which comprises mainly of four components (Furst-Bowe, 2011, p.3):

1. An inclusive leadership system;
2. Clearly defined stakeholder groups and an understanding of their requirements;
3. A participatory planning process; and
4. An end-to-end system for measuring institutional performance.

Each of these components is an integral part of the larger quality management system of the university, where each affects and is affected by the other. A particularly important lesson from the UW-Stout example is that a strong institutional system (which, as noted above, has its own emergent properties) enables the institution to maintain and improve quality, despite major institutional and environmental changes.

In addition to the importance of quality in higher education, transformation of higher education is also essential due to the growing, more diverse, student body, the commercialisation and globalisation of higher education, and the impact of information communication technology (ICT) as more institutions adopt distance education modes of teaching (El-Khawas, 2007). In this context, Watson and Watson (2013) note that the transformation of higher education requires a total system change, rather than trying to fix a dysfunctional system:

> *"Rather than trying to force a square peg in a round hole, systemic change posits that you should design a round peg"* (Watson & Watson, 2013, p.43).

Furthermore, these authors argue for six core characteristics of truly systemic change in higher education. They note that, truly systemic change (Watson & Watson, 2013, p.43):

1. changes institutional culture by changing its assumptions, behaviours, products, and processes;
2. affects the entire institution;
3. is intentional;
4. occurs over time;
5. creates a system that continuously pursues an idealised future for itself; and
6. transforms the current system to perform an entirely new paradigm.

In these six characteristics of systemic change within higher education specifically, one can observe the broader systems thinking principles put forward by Dent and Umpleby (1998) that were discussed above. While the identification and listing of systems thinking principles or characteristics might create the impression of relatively straightforward steps towards change, Watson and Watson (2013) remind us of the complexity embedded within these principles. Citing Duffy and Reigeluth (2010), these authors identify four paradigm shifts that are necessary to create transformational change. These are: transforming the core of a system and the support of its work processes; transforming a system's internal social infrastructure; transforming a system's relationship with its external environment; and transforming the system's change process from fragmentary to complete systemic transformational change.

Applied to higher education, Watson and Watson (2013) argue that transforming the core of the system, relates to the core processes at a university: research, teaching, and service. Universities' internal social infrastructure needs to transform in that a mind shift needs to occur in order for a change from top-down leadership to participatory leadership. Universities should move towards a more collaborative and opportunity-seeking relationship with its external environment instead of the 'ivory tower' relationship it currently maintains. Ultimately, universities should become learning organisations to establish a culture of growth and to become proactive to the pressures that drive change (Watson & Watson, 2013).

The benefits of working in a systems thinking manner in administrative student delivery departments in higher education institutions were highlighted in a study by Dunnion and O'Donovan (2014) which contrasted traditional 'command and control' management logic with systems thinking principles. **Table 4.1** below summarises the contrasting approaches of command and control thinking and systems thinking.

Table 4.1: Command and control thinking versus systems thinking (adapted from Dunnion & O'Donovan, 2014, p.25)

	Command and control thinking	Systems Thinking
Perspective	Top-down	Outside-in
Design	Functional specialisation	Demand, value, and flow
Decision-making	Separated from work	Integrated with work
Measurement	Budget, targets, standards, activity and productivity	Designed against purpose, demonstrate variation
Motivation	Extrinsic	Intrinsic
Management ethic	Manage budgets and people	Act on the system
Attitude to customers	Contractual	What matters?
Attitude to suppliers	Contractual	Partnering and co-operation
Approach to change	Change by project	Adaptive, integral

By using a case study methodology, Dunnion and O'Donovan (2014), explain how applying the Vanguard Method (Seddon, 2008; cited by Dunnion & O'Donovan, 2014), a form of systems thinking developed for use in service organisations, has improved the efficiency of service delivery at an unidentified university in London. In particular, the Vanguard Method that was applied in this instance consists of six steps (Dunnion & O'Donovann, 2014, p.26):

1. What is the purpose of the system from a customer point of view?
2. What is the current demand and frequency of demand placed on the system?
3. How capable is the system at dealing with the demand?
4. What is the work flow?
5. Which conditions explain why the system behaves the way it does?
6. What are the redesign principles which will be adhered to during the experiment and learning phase?

By applying the Vanguard Method to vital university administrative processes, namely applications, registration and timetabling, Dunnion and O'Donovan (2014) observed an improvement in each process. Application decision turnaround time improved from an average of 48 days to an average of three days. A total of 36% of students who completed a student satisfaction survey carried out after registrations rated their experience as ten out of ten, compared to 18% in the previous year. The redesigned timetable, after undergoing the six steps of the Vanguard Method allowed a reduced timetable window from 09:00 to 18:00 from the previous 08:00 to 20:00. In addition, the number of timetabled events was improved from 3900 to 6600.

Despite the somewhat limited literature on systems thinking and higher education, the examples discussed here point to the potential value of applying systems principles in the context of university management and change. In the next section, these principles and lessons are applied to conceptualise the UFS (and the institutional module evaluation system) from a systems thinking point of view.

4.3 Systems thinking at the University of the Free State

As was discussed above, systems thinking offers a broad view of an organisation and thus avoids approaching problems that exist in a complex organisation in isolation. A broad view of an organisation as a system allows one to analyse problems on a deeper level. This requires focus on the relationships between different parts of the system ultimately enabling a deeper understanding of the problem (Bess & Dee, 2012).

While the higher education system of a given country is a system on its own, consisting of many subsystems, a higher education system is simultaneously a part of the larger environment. The higher education system is, therefore, also a subsystem of this larger environment. In addition, a university is also a system on its own with its own subsystems. Ison (2008) argues that naming the specific system of focus is the starting point for a systems approach using action research methodology. For the purpose of this study, systems thinking is applied to the specific case of the UFS, where the UFS is

considered as the system. To conceptualise the UFS as a system it is necessary to focus on the various components of the system and the dynamics of these components within the system. The following sections, especially the sections on the components of a system relies heavily on Bess and Dee (2012). This is because their approach in applying systems thinking to higher education institutions was applicable to this study, however, in section 4.1, 4.2., and 4.4 reference is made to other authors where applicable.

4.3.1 Components of a system

In the following sections the components that make up the UFS system are discussed. These components are later applied in Chapter 8, when module evaluations at the UFS are positioned as a system on its own.

4.3.1.1 The system

Understanding the underlying assumptions of systems thinking, which were explained earlier in this chapter, the components of a system and the role that each of them plays, becomes much clearer when applied to a concrete example. The components of the system, and specifically the interactions between these components, carry out the functions necessary to maintain the system. The broader environment is not a part of the system itself; it is everything outside the system that has an influence on the system (Bess & Dee, 2012). However simple this explanation may seem, it is invariably complex due to the dynamic nature of the components of a system, interactions between components and interactions between the system and the environment. Changes in the workings of a system (which refers to the subsystems and their interconnections) introduced with the aim of changes within a certain subsystem(s) may have unintended consequences in other subsystems. This in turn then requires more changes to address these consequences (Ison, 2008). Responding to unintended consequences contributes to the cyclical nature of causality within the system. With the UFS positioned as the system of focus for this study, we need to identify and take account of the environment within which the system is located. This includes statutory bodies that regulate

universities in South Africa (such as the CHE and HEQC which were discussed in Chapter 2), and the DHET which is a primary source of funding. Other universities in South Africa are also part of the environment, as are the high schools from which the UFS' students originate, as well as the range of organisations that employ the graduates that the university produces. The complexity of the interrelatedness and interactions within the system which may lead to unintended consequences can be explained using the example of changing admission requirements. If admission requirements are raised with the intention to ultimately increasing success rates and graduate throughput it may have the unintended consequence of shrinking the pool of students that meet these requirements. This will then lead to a decrease in student numbers and a decrease in government funding received. Reduced funding, in turn, would affect quality of teaching and learning. Changing admissions requirements would also have an effect at the level of schooling where potential students are being prepared for university.

4.3.1.2 Boundaries

Boundaries separate systems from their environments. The permeability of a boundary determines whether a system is open or closed. Open systems interact with the environment more effortlessly than closed systems which are more reliant on their own internal resources to function properly. Furthermore, since the boundary separates a system from other systems within its environment, it means that the system has its own internal identity which consists of the values, mission and vision of an organisation. (Bess & Dee, 2012).

The boundaries that separate the UFS from its environment include physical boundaries which indicate what areas constitute the campuses of the UFS and differentiate the university from the surrounding areas of these campuses (such as the city of Bloemfontein). Membership of the university, is another example of a boundary, in this case a boundary that is not physical. Thus, students and staff members, are separated from non-members of the system in terms of certain classifications (such as enrolment status and employment status) and this has implications for what they can and cannot do within the system. With respect to membership boundaries, one of the most

obvious ways in which these boundaries are created and enforced is through the staff and student access card systems.

4.1.3.3 Subsystems

Each system consists of various subsystems and the relationships and connections between these subsystems determine the overall functioning of the system. In well-functioning systems, the relationships between subsystems ensures the stability (or homeostasis) of a system (Jackson, 2003). Furthermore, each subsystem is a smaller system on its own with its own environment, boundaries and subsystems. Bess and Dee (2012, p.100) note that there are five generic types of subsystems which exist in some form in all systems/ organisations. These are:

1. *Production or technical subsystems* which are concerned with processing raw material. Lecturers and academic departments are examples of these as they are responsible for teaching and learning at the institution which fosters student learning and allows students to graduate. Graduates, in this case, are then the final products.

2. *Supportive subsystems* assist and enable production subsystems in the production process. Support staff members within faculties who are responsible for administrative support to lecturers as well as support departments at the UFS, such as Student Academic Services and the Centre for Teaching and Learning are examples of supportive subsystems. Another important supportive system is the institutional ICT department and infrastructure.

3. *Maintenance subsystems* facilitate human dynamics within the system to enable them to do their work. The functions of the Department of Human Resources, including recruitment and selection, remuneration, staff development and labour relations facilitate these dynamics. Finance would play a similar role.

4. *Adaptive subsystems* are responsible for considering the long-term survival of the system. The Division for Institutional Advancement, the Directorate for Institutional Research and

Academic Planning, as well as the university Senate are examples of adaptive subsystems at the UFS.

5. *Managerial subsystems* are responsible for decision-making. Top management is responsible for this function at the UFS. Managerial subsystems would also be found within each faculty, centred in the Dean's offices.

4.3.2 The dynamics of a system

To understand systems thinking it is necessary to not only understand the components of the system but also the dynamics of the system which refers to the manner in which the components interact as well as the inputs, processes and outputs. A system receives inputs from its environment which it must use to sustain itself and to produce outputs, which ensures growth of the system (Jackson, 2003). Bess and Dee (2012) distinguish between *maintenance inputs* and *signal inputs*. Maintenance inputs enable the system to operate, such as human resources (staff), students, physical resources, and equipment. Signal inputs are pieces of information that the system requires for decision-making, such as student profile data, data on feeder schools, data about the needs of the labour market, and in the context of this study, data about students' teaching and learning experiences at the module level.

The inputs that are used for institutional growth and goal-attainment are transformed to outputs. Outputs are thus inputs that have been converted, through the transformation process, to final products. Students, for example, are inputs when they enter university with a certain knowledge-base and skillset. Through the transformation process, facilitated through teaching and learning activities, the student is transformed into a graduate with an extended knowledge-base and skillset and the necessary attributes to enter the workplace (Bess & Dee, 2012).

As is evident from the above discussions, language of systems thinking tends to be technical and impersonal, perhaps even sounding mechanical – for example, describing students (who are complex and unique individuals each with their own life stories, aspirations and experiences) as inputs. One reason for this may be that systems thinking originated in the field of Natural Sciences where the

complexity of human nature is not necessarily a focus or consideration. It is therefore important to distinguish between what Checkland (2012) describes as 'hard systems thinking' and 'soft systems thinking'. The distinction between these two approaches is covered in section 4.4 of this chapter. The use of this 'systems language' should be seen as analytical only, and not as descriptive of what it means to be a student, a lecturer, a graduate and so on. This analytical simplification of the components and interactions within a system, allows for a particular kind of analysis of the abstracted workings of a system and its components with the purpose of informing planning and management. As will be seen in Chapters 6 and 7 where the results are presented, even when approached systemically, the experiences and actions of the components of the system are extremely complex and nuanced. Nonetheless, abstracting to the systems level provides a helpful way of conceptualising the dynamic workings of a subsystem such as that of module evaluations (see Chapter 8). One of the ways in which the complexities of a system can be better understood and changed is through the use of action research, which involves the stakeholders making up the various subsystems.

4.4 Systems thinking and Action Research

Flood (2010), argues that the application of systems thinking is concerned with the functioning of the parts of a system. When a problem occurs in this functioning intervention it is necessary to rectify or improve the situation. In this case, the methodology is the intervention that is carried out; it commences with problem identification and ends when a solution has been found and it can reasonably be expected that the situation will sufficiently improve.

Checkland (2012) argues that it is not possible to study the social world and social systems (such as a university), characterised by individuals who each have their own unique perspectives and experiences, in the same way that phenomena in the natural sciences are studied. Thus, solutions to problems that exist in the social world and in the scientific world will be found in different ways. He distinguishes between 'hard systems thinking' and 'soft systems thinking' (SSM) where SSM refers to the approach that is taken when working with social phenomena. SSM is "a learning system aimed at

'action to improve'" (Checkland, 2012, p.467). In the context of SSM, he suggests that Action Research, where the researcher enters a situation and actively participates in the effort to improve the situation, is the most appropriate form of systems research: "rigorously defined action research must be the most appropriate form for any systems research that is interested not only in the thinking but also the action that flows from that thinking" (Checkland, 2012, p.467). This quotation sums up the rationale for using a systems thinking informed approach to action research in this study (see Chapter 5).

Burns (2014) has developed what he terms systemic action research (SAR). This he positions as a form of action research which builds on other forms of action research, such as participatory action research, mainly as a response to the need to address intractable problems through action research. He posits that a SAR approach is especially appropriate where complex problems need to be solved to facilitate change. Dealing with problems that are characterised by multi-directional causality, or where the interaction of multiple factors yields outcomes which cannot be attributed to single interventions, requires systemic understanding of change. In addition to providing an approach to deal with these 'intractable' problems, SAR emanates from the conviction that a wide range of stakeholders should be involved in finding solutions to these problems (Burns, 2014, p.16):

> *"Participation flows not only from a deep belief that people who are stakeholders should be involved, but that stakeholders right across the system (often with very diverse perspectives) have to be involved in order to get sustainable solutions to entrenched problems"*

Understanding stakeholders' (from across the system) experiences of module evaluations, was also vital in the action research approach followed in this study. In considering the links between systems thinking and action research, Ison (2008) developed a helpful four phased model for action research that is grounded in systems thinking. Ison's model has been mostly applied in his own field of agricultural science (for examples, see: Jordan, Slotterback, Cadieux, Mulla, Pitt, Olabisi, & Kim, 2011; Kocher, Kaudela-Baum, & Wolf, 2011; MacNiven, 2005). Even though not applied to higher

education specifically, the ideas remain useful for action research in the context of higher education systems. As a result, this dissertation adds to the literature by applying this model of action research for system research in higher education. The four phases in Ison's model include:

1. Bringing the system of intent into existence (naming the system of intent);
2. Evaluating the effectiveness of the system of intent as a vehicle to elicit useful understanding of the social and cultural context;
3. Generation of a joint decision-making process involving all key stakeholders; and
4. Evaluating the effectiveness of the decisions made in other words, how the action taken has been judged by stakeholders.

The application of Ison's model in this study provided a helpful framework for conceptualising and researching the institutional module evaluation process at the UFS. The research design and methodology which draw on Ison's model are explained in more detail in Chapter 5.

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter provided an overview of systems thinking which was used in this study as a theoretical framework to enhance the effectiveness of the UFS module evaluation system. The principles of systems thinking covered in this chapter emphasised the value that systems thinking can add in the enhancement of a process such as module evaluations at the UFS. In order to improve a system systemic awareness is firstly necessary to identify the system's components and the dynamics between these components. Principles of systems thinking then needs to be systematically applied to improve the system. Principles such as interdeterminism, which suggests that it is not always possible to predict how change in one part of the system will affect other parts of the system, and causality, which states that systems are not linear, but rather circular processes highlight the complexity of systems which ultimately helps to plan interventions for the enhancement of the system. Furthermore,

action research (which was also the approach followed in this study) is suggested to be the most appropriate form of systems research. In Chapter 8, the principles set out in this chapter will be applied to module evaluations at the UFS, but first an overview of the research methodology of this study is covered in the next chapter.

Chapter 5: Research Design and Methodology

"The interpretation of any research findings will expose the researcher's underlying philosophies, drawing on, and extending the notion that all knowledge is knowledge from some point of view" (Feilzer, 2010, p.7).

5.1 Introduction

The research questions were covered in more detail in Chapter 1, but as the research approach and methodology were selected to address these, it may be helpful to briefly revisit them. The overarching research question guiding this study is: how can the UFS effectively institutionalise module evaluations as one mechanism for enhancing quality of teaching and learning? The sub-questions are:

1. How do primary stakeholders (students and lecturers) experience module evaluations?
2. How can knowledge of these experiences be used to enhance module evaluation procedures?
3. How can systems thinking contribute to the process of effectively institutionalising module evaluations?

In this chapter I explain why the research is positioned in a pragmatist paradigm and go on to discuss the mixed methods research design employed in this study. The decision to follow an action research approach in attempting to answer the research questions is covered next, followed by the sampling methods and data collection throughout the three research phases. The chapter is concluded with the ethical considerations of the study and my approach to the analyses of the data.

5.2 Paradigmatic positioning of this study

Creswell (2009, p.6) describes a paradigm as a worldview: "I see worldviews as a general orientation about the world and the nature of research that the researcher holds". It is also referred to as "a set of

beliefs that guides action" (Guba, 1990, p.17). It is, however, the case that researchers can conduct research without properly understanding their paradigm or the assumptions associated with it. Mertens (2014, p.7) notes that unawareness of one's paradigm does not discard its existence, after all 'all knowledge is knowledge from some point of view' as the quote at the beginning of the chapter highlights. Mertens reminds us that:

> *"Working without an awareness of our underlying philosophical assumptions does not mean that we do not have such assumptions, only that we are conducting research that rests on unexamined and unrecognised assumptions".*

The paradigmatic positioning of a study underpins decisions concerning the research methods applied (Creswell, 2009). Mertens (2014) takes an even stronger stance suggesting that a researcher's worldview has implications for every decision made in the research process, including, but not limited to, choices concerning research methods. It is thus critical for the paradigmatic position adopted in this study to be explained in greater detail. In the following section I explain why this study is positioned in the pragmatist paradigm.

5.2.1 Pragmatism

Pragmatism is concerned with actions and consequences. It has a practical component in that it is about finding solutions to problems (Creswell, 2009) which is exactly what this study sets out to do. Feilzer (2010, p.8) defines pragmatism as follows:

> *"Pragmatism, when regarded as an alternative paradigm, sidesteps the contentious issues of truth and reality, accepts, philosophically, that there are singular and multiple realities that are open to empirical inquiry and orients itself toward solving practical problems in the 'real world'".*

Solving problems in the real world relates to action research which studies aspects of practice with the view to improvement (Koshy, 2005). As such, one of the reasons this study is positioned in the pragmatist paradigm, is that the main purpose of it is to improve practice. The study is mainly

concerned with practical problems in the development and implementation of the current module evaluation system at the UFS. The current practices of the module evaluation system were studied with the purpose to ultimately improve them.

The most appropriate way to go about answering the research questions of this study was to employ both qualitative and quantitative research methods. The decision was made in an effort to answer the research questions, led by the purpose of the study. The way in which the decision was made is characteristic of pragmatism. A key principle of pragmatism is that the purpose of the research and the accompanying research questions should guide the research process and research design decisions (Goldkuhl, 2004).

For this study, both qualitative and quantitative methods were needed to answer the research questions. Although the focus of the study centred on the rich qualitative findings, the quantitative results were needed to contextualise the qualitative findings and to fully understand the module evaluation system. In the following section mixed methods as a design is discussed, followed by the mixed methods research design applied in this study.

5.3 Mixed methods

Despite Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009, p.4) describing mixed methods research as being 'in its adolescence', it has been established as a worthy alternative to, and yet combination of, traditional qualitative and quantitative research approaches. As such, several authors have put forward definitions describing mixed methods. In their quest to develop a comprehensive definition for mixed methods research, taking into consideration nineteen definitions of prominent mixed methods researchers, Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, and Turner (2007, p.129) suggest the following as a comprehensive definition of mixed methods research:

> *"Mixed methods research is an intellectual and practical synthesis based on qualitative and quantitative research; it is the third methodological or research paradigm (along*

> *with qualitative and quantitative research). It recognises the importance of traditional quantitative and qualitative research but also offers a powerful third paradigm choice that often will provide the most informative, complete, balanced, and useful research results".*

Mertens (2014, p.3) simply defines mixed methods research as follows: 'Mixed methods researchers collect both types (quantitative and qualitative) of data'. Collecting and analysing both qualitative and quantitative data requires skills in both methods, however, which can be considered one of the challenges of mixed methods research (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011). In addition, combining qualitative and quantitative methods can be time consuming and expensive (Driscoll, Appiah-Yeboah, Salib, & Rupert, 2007).

Notwithstanding the challenges of mixed methods research, there are a number of advantages to employing a mixed methods design in a research study. Driscoll et al. (2007) note that mixed methods designs can be especially applicable when exploring complex research problems as qualitative data provides a deeper understanding of quantitative responses, whilst statistical analyses highlights patterns of responses. Molina-Azorin (2011) suggests that triangulating one set of results with another enhances the validity of interpretations. He further argues that another benefit of mixed methods includes clarifying findings from one method with another.

Furthermore, Pragmatism lends itself to mixed methods research as pragmatists believe that both quantitative and qualitative methods can be useful. They base their decision of a research method on what the most sensible way will be to answer the research question(s) (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). It is precisely this flexibility that is required to be a successful mixed methods researcher (and also for conducting action research). Pragmatism allows a researcher to be unrestricted by practical constraints imposed by post-positivism and constructivism which require specific methodologies (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011).

5.3.1 Mixed methods research design

A number of mixed methods research designs have been put forward in the literature (Creswell, 2003; Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011; Driscoll et al., 2007; & Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). The *parallel mixed design*, presented by Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009, p.152) most closely resembles the research design of this study. A parallel mixed design is one with no less than two reasonably independent strands. One strand comprises qualitative questions, data collection and analysis, while the other comprises quantitative questions, data collection and analysis. Interpretations and deductions made in each strand are integrated and combined at the end of the study, which Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009, p.152) refer to as 'meta-analysis'. The meta-analysis or meta-inferences at the end takes place to answer the overarching research question. **Figure 5.1** is an illustration of a typical parallel mixed design.

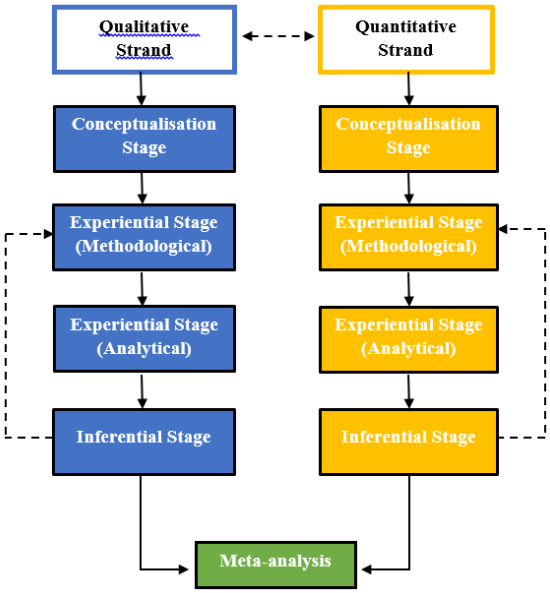


Figure 5.1: Illustration of the parallel mixed methods research design (adapted from Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009, p.152).

Collecting qualitative and quantitative data simultaneously, performing analyses of each independently and integrating the findings at the end of the study is similar to what Creswell and Plano-Clark (2011) describe as a concurrent design. In contrast to this, a sequential design is one where data is collected in an iterative process through a phased approach. Data collected in one phase

contributes to the data collected in the next phase. Decisions in a later phase or phases are made based on inferences made by analysing data in an earlier phase or phases.

The research design of this study, although complying with the requirements of a parallel mixed methods research design for the most part, possesses characteristics of a sequential design which is not typical of a parallel design. Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) address exactly this, which is the difficulty researchers may often experience in perfectly fitting their research design into one of the design typologies proposed by leading authors in the field of mixed methods:

> *"Therefore, you should look for the most appropriate or single best available research design, rather than the 'perfect fit'. You may have to combine existing designs, or create new designs for your study" (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009, p.138).*

Figure 5.2 presents an illustration of the specific mixed methods design employed in this action research study. The data was collected over three phases and although the design in each of the phases resembles the mixed parallel design, there was a sequential element in the study as data collected in earlier phases. This then informed decisions made about the data collected in later phases and so was applicable in this study. Phases building on knowledge acquired in previous phases is a characteristic of action research (Koshy, 2005). From **Figure 5.2** it is clear that the qualitative data that was gathered in this study carried more weight than the quantitative data and will be further emphasised in the results chapters (see Chapter 6 and Chapter 7). Although the rich qualitative data was needed to fully understand the module evaluation stakeholder experiences, the quantitative data was nonetheless necessary to contextualise the qualitative findings. It also allowed for methodological triangulation. The flexibility that a pragmatist approach allows in terms of the methods used to collect data, as well as to make research design decisions, allowed for the adaptation of the parallel mixed methods design put forward by Teddlie & Tashakkori (2009, p.152). Therefore, this enabled the best answer for the research questions.

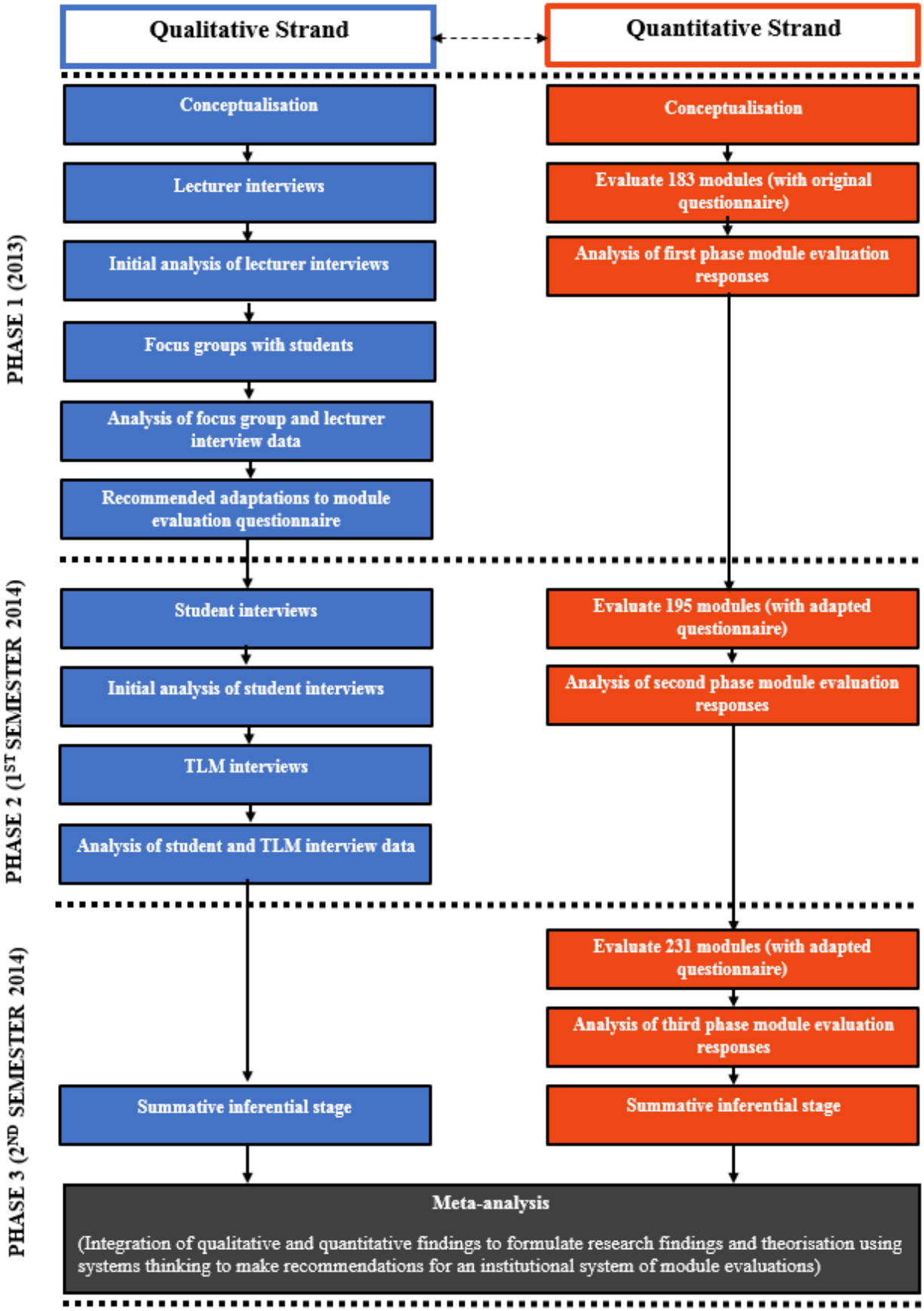


Figure 5.2: Illustration of the parallel mixed methods design used in this study.

5.4 Action research approach

Koshy (2005, p.1) defines action research as: "an enquiry undertaken with rigour and understanding so as to constantly refine practice". Its main purpose is to study aspects of practice with the view to improve the practice (Koshy, 2005). In this study aspects of module evaluation practice were studied within the context of assessing the effectiveness of these practices to ultimately improve them. Pragmatism (introduced in section 5.2 of this chapter) provides an underpinning and rationale for the practice of action research:

> *"While action research is often praised as having a practical impact on a local context, it is also making the wider pragmatic point that without action we would not know what is useful or desirable: it is only by undertaking the journey that our ends, and the actions needed to achieve those ends, become clear" (Hammond, 2013, p.609).*

Action research is commonly recognised as being about change and collaborative practices. McNiff (2014, p.14) suggests that some purposes of action research include: generating new knowledge, achieving action-oriented outcomes, educating the researcher and participants in the research, obtaining results relevant to the local setting, and providing a sound research methodology.

Action research models have been put forward by various authors. An example of one such model that explains the steps and cyclical nature of action research is O'Leary's (2004, p.141) cycles of action research shown in **Figure 5.3**. The cycle starts with observing, which includes collecting data followed by reflecting critically on the collected data. A plan is then devised followed by implementation. The second cycle starts by observing again the situation which has emerged due to the implementation of the previous cycle and these steps are carried out in a cyclical nature until satisfactory improvement can be observed.

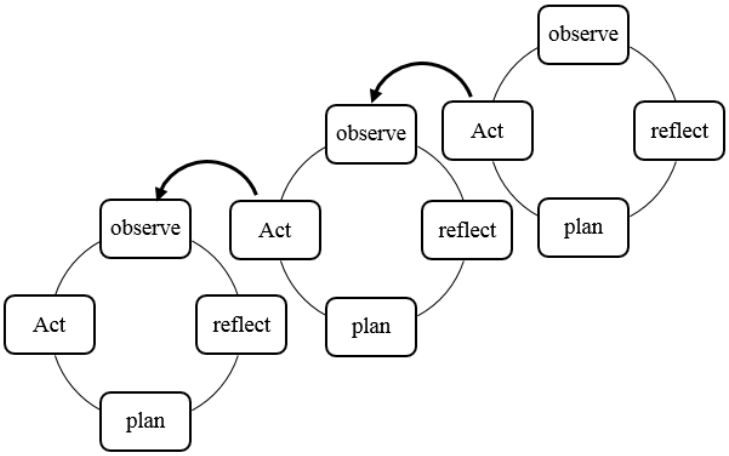


Figure 5.3: Cycles of action research model (Adapted from O'Leary, 2004, p.141).

Action research is concerned with improving practice, which often requires dealing with difficult or 'intractable' problems (also see section 4.4 of Chapter 4). Therefore, Checkland (2012, p.469) suggests that "action research must be the most appropriate form of systems research that is interested not only in the thinking but also the action that flows from the thinking". Given that systems thinking is the underlying theoretical framework of this study, it is necessary to understand how an action research approach was taken within this framework. Ison's four-phase model of action research is grounded in systems thinking and was the basis of this study (Ison, 2008, p.152) (see section 4.4).

5.4.1 Alignment of Ison's model with this study

Ison's model (2008) consists of four phases of which the first is to bring the system of interest into existence. In aligning the model with this study, it should be mentioned that the first phase was already completed prior to the start of the study. This occurred when UFS management recognised the need for an institutional module evaluation system and so the system of intent came into existence. The first phase is therefore not the focus of this study. A description of how the remaining three phases of Ison's model were aligned with this study follows below, while **Figure 5.4** provides an illustration of the alignment:

Phase 1 – Gather feedback from primary stakeholders: The primary stakeholders are those who are influenced most directly by module evaluations. At the UFS they are the lecturers, who play a

vital role in teaching and learning which are aspects evaluated in the module evaluation questionnaire, and students, who complete the evaluations. Feedback was gathered from the primary stakeholders in the first phase of the research by interviewing lecturers and conducting focus groups with students. Furthermore, a total of 183 modules were evaluated during this phase. Through these methods it was possible to begin to formulate an understanding of the institutional context of module evaluations.

Phase 2 – Generation of a joint decision-making process by involving all key stakeholders: In this phase feedback was gathered from TLMs at the UFS, who are responsible for the module evaluation process in the faculties, by interviewing each of them. Interviews were conducted with students to do item-testing of the questionnaire. Selected items which were identified as difficult to understand by students that participated in the first phase focus groups were tested during these interviews. In this phase 195 modules were evaluated. Changes to the process were proposed at the end of this phase.

Phase 3 – Evaluating the effectiveness of the decisions made: In this phase the changes proposed in phase 2 were implemented and reflected on. A total of 231 modules were evaluated in this phase.

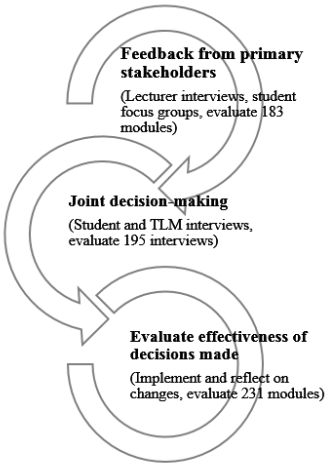


Figure 5.4: Illustration of the alignment of Ison's action research model with this study.

5.5 Sampling

Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2007) argue that the suitability of a sampling strategy is important in the overall quality of a piece of research. Several factors, such as expense, time and accessibility prevent researchers from gathering data from entire populations. Therefore, researchers need to be able to obtain data from a subgroup of the population in such a way that the knowledge acquired from the subgroup of research participants is representative of the entire population. Cohen et al., (2007, p.100) further discuss four main factors which need to be considered when making sampling decisions:

1. Sample size;
2. Representativeness and parameters of the sample;
3. Access to the sample; and
4. Sampling strategy

Sampling decisions made in each phase of this study will be discussed below using these four factors as a guide.

5.5.1 Phase 1

In the first phase of the research, which stretched over a period of one year (2013), data was gathered from lecturers and students. The sampling procedures followed to gather data during this phase are described below.

5.5.1.1 Sampling procedures for gathering data from lecturers in Phase 1

Less specific sample size requirements exist for qualitative research than for quantitative research. Data saturation, which entails continually adding participants to the study until no new information is being gathered or nothing new is added is a commonly used approach (Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, & Fontenot, 2013). It is, however, often necessary to define sample size prior to the commencement of

research as this has implications for adequately making provision for time and resources required to conduct the research. Robinson (2014) argues that the more heterogeneous the sample, the more research participants are required. Furthermore, Robinson (2014) suggests that the researcher should preliminarily start analysing the data while the data is collected, and not only start with the analysis after all data has been collected. This permits the researcher to determine when the data collected has reached a saturation point.

In this study, a total of 25 lecturers from both the UFS Bloemfontein and Qwaqwa campuses were interviewed in the first phase of the research (see Chapter 7 for a more comprehensive overview of the demographical composition of the sample). Only lecturers involved in the institutional module evaluation pilot were considered for inclusion. This is because one purpose of the interviews was to determine what lecturers', as primary stakeholders of module evaluations, experiences of the pilot were. To ensure factors contributing to the heterogeneity of the sample were being compensated for, the following criteria were applied in the selection of lecturers to participate in the research through a stratified sampling strategy:

- Lecturers from each faculty participating in the pilot were included;
- Lecturers lecturing both English and Afrikaans classes were included;
- Both male and female lecturers were included;
- Lecturers lecturing modules which obtained high, average and low response rates in the first phase of the study were included;

Selected lectures were emailed explaining the purpose of the interview, inviting them to participate in the research. All selected lecturers agreed to be interviewed. The interview questions (see Appendix G) were emailed to each lecturer prior to the interviews, allowing them to prepare.

5.5.1.2 Sampling procedures for gathering data from students in Phase 1

Both qualitative and quantitative data were gathered from undergraduate students in the first phase of the research. Qualitative data was collected through six focus groups among undergraduate students

on both the UFS Bloemfontein (four focus groups) and Qwaqwa (two focus groups) campuses. The purpose of the focus groups was to better understand student experiences of module evaluations and their recommendations for the improvement of module evaluations. There was also a component testing students' understanding of the items on the module evaluation instrument included during the focus groups (see Appendices H and I for instruments used in the collection of focus group data).

An email was sent to all students at the Bloemfontein campus enrolled for modules included in the module evaluation pilot, inviting them to participate in focus groups. Students who were interested in participating in the research were asked to reply with an email including their student number, year of study, faculty that they were registered in, and contact number. A database was created containing information of the 321 students who indicated their interest to participate in the study. At the Qwaqwa campus a Student Representative Council (SRC) member (Academics Portfolio) assisted with student recruitment. The SRC at the UFS is elected to represent the student community of the UFS and must serve its interests and must integrate and promote the development of student activities and structures that improve learning and the cultural recreational environment of the UFS (University of the Free State, 2011).

To encourage student participation in the focus groups, a lucky draw for an iPad mini was held and refreshments were provided in each focus group. Both elements of convenience sampling and purposive sampling were thus present in the selection of participants.

A convenience sampling strategy was employed as students volunteered to participate in the research. The selection was, however, purposive, to ensure that a diverse group of students was included in the study. The following criteria were applied in the selection of students to ensure diversity of the sample:

- Students from each faculty participating in the pilot were included;
- Students receiving instruction in English and in Afrikaans were included (five English focus groups and one Afrikaans focus group were conducted);
- Both male and female students were included;

- First, second, third, fourth, and fifth year undergraduate students were included; and
- Students from the Bloemfontein and Qwaqwa campuses were included (four focus groups on the Bloemfontein campus and two focus groups on the Qwaqwa campus were conducted).

A total of 60 students participated in the focus groups (see Chapter 7 for an overview of the demographic composition of the sample).

Quantitative data was collected from students from the UFS Bloemfontein and Qwaqwa campuses who were enrolled for one or more of the 183 undergraduate modules that were evaluated in the first phase of the research. A total of 10182 module evaluation questionnaires out of a possible 72729 were completed during this phase of the pilot project (see **Table 5.1**).

Table 5.1: Overview of quantitative data collected in the first phase of the research

Number of modules	183
Number of module registrations[14]	72729
Number of responses[15]	10182
Response rate[16]	14%

Both paper-based and online evaluations were completed in phase 1. **Table 5.2** gives an overview of the number of questionnaires completed via both methods. Refer to Chapter 7 for a detailed account of the online and paper-based module evaluation processes.

Table 5.2: Number of online versus paper-based questionnaires completed in phase 1 per faculty

Method	Education	EMS	Humanities	Law	NAS	Theology	UFS
Phase 1							
Online	1014	3314	439	376	1235	135	6513
Paper	0	167	3033	352	63	54	3669

[14] One student may be enrolled for more than one module. We therefore counted module registrations instead of students.
[15] Students had to complete more than one questionnaire in modules that were presented by more than one lecturer
[16] Response rate is calculated as total number of responses divided by total number of module registrations.

5.5.2 Phase 2

Phase 2 of the research was conducted in the first semester of 2014. During this phase of the research, data was collected from students and TLMs.

5.5.2.1 Sampling procedures for gathering data from students

Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected from students in the second phase of the research. Qualitative data was collected through student interviews on the UFS Bloemfontein and Qwaqwa campuses. These interviews were conducted to build on information gathered in the student focus groups conducted in the first phase of the research to test students' understanding of items on the module evaluation instrument.

An announcement was made on the UFS learning management system (Blackboard), to all students enrolled for undergraduate modules, briefly explaining the purpose of the research and asking for voluntary participation. Students who were interested in participating were asked to reply with an email containing their student number, year of study, faculty in which they are registered for a qualification, and contact number. A database was created containing information of the 366 students who indicated their desire to participate. On the Qwaqwa campus a staff member working in CTL assisted with the recruitment of students. To encourage participation, students who were selected to participate in the study each received R100 on their student cards in recognition of their time.

A convenience sampling strategy was employed as students volunteered to participate in the research. The selection was, however, purposive to ensure a diverse group of students were included in the study. As with the selection of students for the focus groups these criteria were developed to aid in providing a structured framework from which students could be selected for participation. The following criteria were applied in the selection of students to ensure diversity of the sample:

- Students from each faculty participating in the pilot were included;

- Students receiving instruction in English and in Afrikaans were included (five Afrikaans students and eleven English students were interviewed);
- Both male and female students were included;
- First, second, third, fourth, and fifth year undergraduate students were included; and
- Students from the Bloemfontein and Qwaqwa campus were included (five students on the Qwaqwa campus and eleven students on the Bloemfontein campus were interviewed).

A total of 16 students participated in the interviews (see section 7.3 in Chapter 7 for an overview of the demographic composition of the sample).

Quantitative data was collected from students from the UFS Bloemfontein and Qwaqwa campuses who were enrolled in one or more of the 195 undergraduate modules that were evaluated in the second phase of the research. A total of 6300 module evaluation questionnaires out of a possible 35384 were completed during this phase of the research (see **Table 5.3**).

Table 5.3: Overview of quantitative data collected from students in the second phase of the research

Number of modules	195
Number of module registrations	35384
Number of responses	6300
Response rate	18%

Both paper-based and online evaluations were completed in this phase. **Table 5.4** gives an overview of the number of questionnaires completed via both methods.

Table 5.4: Number of online versus paper-based questionnaires completed in phase 2 per faculty

Method	Education	EMS	Humanities	Law	NAS	Theology	UFS
Phase 2							
Online	198	521	531	254	402	18	1924
Paper	0	74	3896	63	343	0	4376

5.5.2.2 Sampling procedures for gathering data from TLMs

As there is only one TLM per faculty, all TLMs (n=6) of faculties participating in the institutional module evaluation pilot were interviewed. TLMs were emailed and asked to participate in the research. Their participation was voluntary and all six TLMs agreed to be interviewed. In this instance, the entire population was thus included in the study and sampling was not necessary.

5.5.3 Phase 3

Phase 3 of the study was conducted in the second semester of 2014. Only quantitative data was collected during this phase by means of student evaluations. Students would have completed module evaluation questionnaires regardless of whether this study was conducted or not as part of official university procedures. The main focus of this phase of the research was reflecting on inferences made in previous phases and the effectiveness of changes implemented.

5.5.3.1 Sampling procedures for gathering data from students

Quantitative data was collected from students at the UFS Bloemfontein and Qwaqwa campuses who were enrolled for one or more of the 231 undergraduate modules that were evaluated in the third phase of the research. A total of 9094 module evaluation questionnaires out of a possible 38193 were completed during this phase of the research (see **Table 5.5**).

Table 5.5: Overview of quantitative data collected in the third phase of the research

Number of modules	231
Number of module registrations	38193
Number of responses	9094
Response rate	24%

Both online and paper-based questionnaires were completed in phase 3. **Table 5.6** gives an overview of the number of questionnaires completed via both methods.

Table 5.6: Number of online versus paper-based questionnaires completed in phase 3 per faculty

Method	Education	EMS	Humanities	Law	NAS	Theology	UFS
Phase 3							
Online	213	739	5145	1027	1074	104	8302
Paper	0	24	133	196	439	0	792

5.6 Data collection

Various research instruments were used throughout the three phases of this study. **Table 5.7** provides an overview of research instruments used. The prominent focus on the qualitative data is also evident from this overview, as the majority of instruments used were for the collection of qualitative data.

Table 5.7: Research instruments used in this study.

Stakeholder group	Research instrument used
Lecturers	Lecturer interview question schedule (Appendix G)
Students	Original institutional module evaluation questionnaire (Appendices A and B)
	Adapted institutional module evaluation questionnaire (Appendix C)
	Student focus group general discussion question schedule (Appendix H)
	Student focus group question review (Appendix I)
	Student interview question schedule (Appendix J)
TLMs	TLM interview question schedule (Appendix K)

5.6.1 Data collected from lecturers

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 25 lecturers in the first phase of the research. Each interview consisted of 15 questions, which were sent to each participant prior to the interview in order to give them an opportunity to prepare. Although these questions provided a structure for the

interview, interviewees could elaborate on the topics. As the interviews were about their experiences of module evaluations, lecturers were encouraged to add topics relevant to their experience of module evaluations if they were not included in the interview question schedule.

5.6.2 Data collected from students

Data was collected from students in all three of the research phases. In the first phase, six focus groups were conducted with 60 undergraduate students. Each focus group consisting of between 8 – 13 students, lasted an hour. These focus groups comprised two sections. The first was a general group discussion about student experiences of module evaluations. The group was then divided into smaller groups for the second section of the focus group. In order to test how understandable items on the original institutional module evaluation questionnaire were to students, focus group participants were asked to explain in their own words what the items on the instrument meant. Each student received seven items from the module evaluation questionnaire and first had to rate how understandable the question was and then had to explain the meaning of the question in their own words (see Appendix I).

Qualitative data was also gathered from students in the second phase of the research through semi-structured student interviews. A total of 16 undergraduate students were interviewed to determine students' understanding of items on the module evaluation instrument. These were questions which were identified as being generally misunderstood or ambiguous during the student focus groups which were conducted in the first phase of the research. Interviews lasted between 15 – 25 minutes and consisted of seven questions. Each question required students to explain their understanding of an item on the module evaluation instrument (see Appendix J).

Quantitative data was collected from students throughout all three phases of the research through their responses on the institutional module evaluation questionnaire. Two versions of the questionnaire were used. The original version was used in the first phase of the research, while the adapted version was used in the second and third phases. Adaptations made to the instrument were based on findings of the student focus groups and lecturer interviews in the first phase of the research (refer to Chapter 7

for a detailed discussion on the adaptations made to the instrument based on the qualitative data gathered from students). The original questionnaire was developed by a research team consisting of members of DIRAP and CTL and was based on an extensive review of the literature including the SEEQ and the CEQ and existing faculty module evaluation instruments.

Both the original and adapted institutional module evaluation questionnaires consist of five sections of quantitative items: demographic information, module design and learning outcomes, assessment, teaching and learning, and class climate. A final section (comments) consisted of qualitative items. The original questionnaire consists of 32 quantitative items and three qualitative items while the adapted questionnaire consists of 31 quantitative items and three qualitative items (see Appendices A – C). Only the quantitative items were considered, as it was not in the scope of this study to analyse module evaluation results. The focus of this study was rather on the module evaluation process.

5.6.3 Data collected from TLMs

Qualitative data was gathered from six TLMs through semi-structured interviews. Each interview lasted between 20 – 30 minutes. A total of 15 questions were included in the interview question schedule but TLMs were given an opportunity to elaborate on the topics discussed (see Appendix K). The purpose of the interviews was to determine what the process of module evaluations is in each faculty and how module evaluations are used within the faculty. TLMs were also asked to reflect on how the module evaluation process could be improved. In addition to the interviews that were conducted among TLMs as part of this study, several meetings, at which TLMs were also present, were held to discuss the module evaluation processes in different faculties and the progress of the institutional module evaluation pilot. Although these meetings were not a formal part of the research, they did inform the module evaluation process.

5.7 Ethical considerations

Students can be considered a vulnerable population group. Students were involved in this research study because they provided feedback on their modules, as part of institutional module evaluation procedures, and because their experiences of module evaluations were the focus of this study. Since I was employed in a support services department not directly affiliated with any faculty or department in a teaching capacity during all three phases of the research, this should not raise any specific ethical concerns. Nonetheless ethical concerns are essential in research and therefore the main ethical considerations of this study are described below[17].

5.7.1 Voluntary participation

All research participants in all three phases of the research participated voluntarily. Students volunteered to participate in the focus groups and interviews and completing module evaluation questionnaires is a voluntary process at the UFS. Lecturers and TLMs also participated in the interviews voluntarily. All research participants were informed prior to the commencement of the data collection that they were free to cease their participation in the research at any point without any negative consequences. No participants did, however, choose to withdraw during the study.

5.7.2 Anonymity and confidentiality

Students complete module evaluation questionnaires anonymously. Nowhere on the questionnaire are they prompted to provide information (such as their name, identity number or student number) which can be used to personally identify them. Students participating in the focus groups were asked to record their names on a separate form if they wished to participate in the lucky draw for the iPad. However, they were not required to identify themselves in the focus group discussion or to record their names on the questionnaire completed in the second part of the focus group. Their names could thus not be linked to their responses. The identities of students participating in the student interviews

[17]I obtained ethical clearance for this research from the Faculty of Education (see Appendix D).

were known to the researcher, but they were assigned numbers for reporting purposes, therefore making their responses anonymous.

Lecturer and TLM identities were also known to the researcher, but they were also assigned numbers for reporting purposes. Every effort was made to ensure TLM responses were anonymous by not specifying faculties in reporting the data pertaining to specific faculties as there is only one TLM per faculty and hence their identities can be ascertained by linking them to their faculties.

5.8 Approach to data analysis

The following sections provide an overview of how qualitative and quantitative data was managed and analysed.

5.8.1 Management of qualitative data

Student focus groups and all interviews, including student, lecturer, and TLM interviews, were recorded with a digital recorder and transcribed verbatim. As the researcher, I conducted and analysed all focus groups and interviews. Two research assistants, employed by DIRAP, assisted with transcribing student focus groups and lecturer interviews. I analysed all qualitative data, including transcriptions and recordings using NVivo 9.1 qualitative analysis software. Emergent themes were identified first by making use of open coding. To ensure accuracy, the coding was revisited and cross-checked as new information from new data sources was collected and checked several times throughout all three phases of the research. The qualitative research findings are presented in Chapter 7.

5.8.2 Management of quantitative data

Quantitative data collected in this study in the form of completed module evaluation questionnaires was stored on the password protected electronic module evaluation system EvaSys. Data was

exported from EvaSys to Excel and SPSS in a format that needed relatively little cleaning. This quantitative data was analysed by calculating means and modes of student ratings per faculty and on an institutional level – carrying out analyses for each phase separately. Response rates for each phase (per faculty and on an institutional level) were also calculated. Reliability calculations, to determine Cronbach's alpha for the original module evaluation instrument, as well as the adapted version of the instrument, were carried out in SPSS. A statistics expert was requested to review the statistical analyses to ensure accuracy. The quantitative research results are presented in Chapter 6.

5.8.3 Meta-analysis

The meta-analysis in a mixed methods study is the integration of qualitative and qualitative findings that took place after the quantitative and qualitative data had been analysed separately. It is useful to refer back to the parallel mixed methods design that were used in this study (see section 5.3.1) in the discussion of the approach to the meta-analysis. A meta-analysis of findings was conducted to answer the overarching research question of the study. The results of the meta-analysis are presented in Chapter 9, but the process followed to conduct the meta-analysis is described in Chapter 8. In Chapter 8, systems thinking principles are integrated with the combined analysis of quantitative and qualitative results to position module evaluations as a system and to describe the dynamics of the module evaluation system. In order to answer the overarching research question, three research sub-questions were answered. The first research sub-question (to understand module evaluation stakeholder experiences) was answered by analysing qualitative results. The second research sub-question (to determine how knowledge about stakeholder experiences can be used to enhance practice) was answered by integrating qualitative and quantitative findings. The third research sub-question (to determine how systems thinking can contribute to the institutionalisation of module evaluations) required the integration of systems thinking theory with the meta-analysis of the quantitative and qualitative findings. In order to answer the overarching research question, and in the process to first answer the three research sub-questions, an integration of the qualitative and quantitative data with systems thinking theory was thus necessary.

5.9 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have provided a comprehensive overview of the research methodology and design that were followed in this study. The first sections of the chapter position the study in the pragmatist paradigm, and describe the mixed methods approach. Following this, was an introduction to the action research approach that was followed in this study. Next, the sampling decisions for each research phase, as well as the data collection methods used were covered. The chapter was concluded with ethical considerations and, finally, my approach to data analysis.

Chapter 6: Quantitative Research Results

6.1 Introduction

The institutional module evaluation pilot project generated a vast amount of quantitative data. The available data includes actual student ratings at module, departmental, faculty and institutional level, stretching over a period of two years. Since the focus in this study was on institutional systems change in the area of module evaluations, it was beyond the scope of this study to analyse and present the results of all the quantitative data that was collected over the three research phases. The focus of this action research study has been on the process of introducing and establishing an institutional module evaluation system, rather than on the actual ratings students gave. Nonetheless, there are some important trends in the quantitative data that are of relevance to the larger institutional process. After presenting an overview of how the module evaluation instrument was adapted across the three phases of the action research, the chapter moves on to discuss module evaluation results and then response rates in light of the process changes introduced across the three phases. **Figure 6.1** below is an overview of the data that was collected over the three action research phases, highlighting the quantitative data collected in each phase. The figure also shows how the institutional module evaluation process expanded over the three phases, from 183 modules in Phase 1 to 213 in Phase 3.

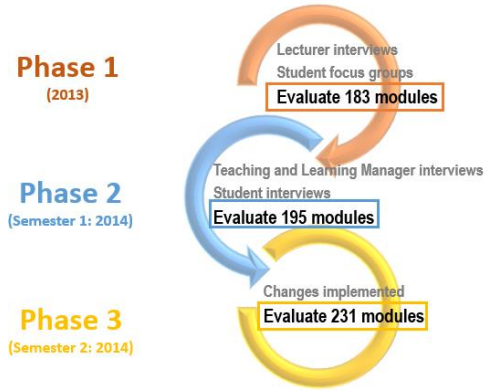


Figure 6.1: Illustration of the data collected during the three phases of this study.

Table 6.1 below provides an overview of the demographic profile of students who completed module evaluations in each phase of the research. More females than males completed the evaluations in each phase, which is congruent with the student profile of the UFS. Because the majority of students receive instruction in English (also see section 2.3 in Chapter 2), it also makes sense that the majority of survey respondents would indicate their language of instruction as English. **Table 6.1** also shows that the vast majority of students who completed the questionnaire indicated that they attend all, most or some of their classes. This is an issue that will be explored in more detail in the next sections of this chapter.

Table 6.1: Demographic profile of students who completed module evaluations in each phase of the research

	Phase 1		Phase 2		Phase 3	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Gender						
Male	3 632	36	1817	29	3024	32
Female	6 367	64	4377	69	6128	65
Race						
African	6 061	60	3645	58	5215	56
White	3 022	30	1854	29	2938	31
Coloured	659	7	524	8	619	7
Asian	177	2	56	1	112	1
Other	158	2	97	2	208	2
Language of instruction						
Afrikaans	2 374	25	1466	23	2358	27
English	7 308	75	4431	70	6253	73
Home language						
Afrikaans	3 044	30	2022	32	3104	33
English	985	10	533	8	774	8
IsiNdebele	30	0	18	0	22	0
IsiXhosa	815	8	521	8	761	8
IsiZulu	905	9	485	8	699	7
Sesotho sa Leboa	208	2	125	2	174	2
Sesotho	2 445	24	1465	23	2095	22
Setswana	986	10	636	10	891	10
SiSwati	83	1	64	1	93	1
Tshivenda	203	2	108	2	180	2
Xitsonga	98	1	56	1	80	1
Other	234	2	114	2	191	2
Classes attended						

	Phase 1		Phase 2		Phase 3	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
All	4 739	47	2810	45	4058	43
Most	4 712	47	3036	48	4528	48
Some	449	4	269	4	415	4
Very few	143	1	72	1	140	1
None	30	0	12	0	23	0

6.2 Adaptation of the instrument

Over the three research phases, a total of 609 modules were evaluated across six faculties at the UFS, and a total of 25,576 student responses were recorded. A more detailed account of the data that was collected is provided in Chapter 5. The original institutional module evaluation instrument, which was piloted in phase 1 of the research, consisted of five biographical questions, 25 quantitative items (covering four broad themes), and three qualitative items. One quantitative item was omitted after phase 1 and the wording of several other quantitative items were changed in phase 2 of the study based on stakeholder feedback. **Table 6.2** provides a summary of the changes that were made to the instrument from phase 1 – 3. The shaded cells indicate where changes were made to items (see Chapter 5 for a discussion on the instrument).

Table 6.2: Changes to module evaluation items throughout the action research phases

Theme/ Scale	Original items	Adapted items
Module design and learning materials	I understood the learning outcomes	I understood the learning outcomes
	The content taught in the module related to the learning outcomes	The content (the work covered/contained in the module) related to the learning outcomes
	The learning materials helped me to learn	The learning materials helped me to learn
	I was satisfied with the library and/or digital resources available for this module	I was satisfied with the library and/or digital resources available for this module
Assessment	The module content prepared me for the assessment (assignments, tests, examinations)	The module content (the work covered/contained in the module) prepared me for the assessment (assignments, tests, examinations)
	The assessment requirements for this module were clear	Item removed

Theme/ Scale	Original items	Adapted items
	Feedback on my assessment was provided in the specified time (as indicated by the lecturer)	Feedback on my assessment was provided in the specified time (as indicated by the lecturer)
	The marking criteria were clearly specified	The marking criteria were clearly specified
	The feedback provided on my assessment tasks helped me to improve my performance	The feedback provided on my assessment tasks helped me to understand my mistakes
Teaching and Learning	The lecturer presented the material in a manner that helped me to learn	Rate your lecturer's presentation skills
	The lecturer was well prepared for class	Rate your lecturer's preparedness for class
	The lecturer spoke clearly and audibly	Rate your lecturer's language skills
	The use of technology in this module (e.g. Blackboard, mobile learning and other online tools) enhanced my learning	The use of technology in this module (e.g. Blackboard, mobile learning and other online tools) enhanced my learning
	Adequate support was provided to help me be successful in this module (e.g. tutorials, additional learning material and/ or practical exercises)	Adequate support was provided to help me be successful in this module (such as tutorials, additional reading material and/or practical exercises)
	I felt motivated to learn for this module	I felt motivated to learn for this module
	The workload in this module was manageable	The workload in this module was manageable
	The lecturer sets high expectations	The lecturer expects students to do their best
	I asked questions and/ or participated in class discussions	I asked questions and/or participated in class discussions
	I worked with other students in this module to complete activities, tasks, assignments or assessments	I worked with other students in this module to complete activities, tasks, assignments or assessments
	I communicated with my lecturer face to face	I communicated with my lecturer face to face (after class/during consultation hours)
	I communicated with my lecturer online (email, Facebook, Blackboard and so on).	I communicated with my lecturer online about the module (email, Facebook, Blackboard and so on)
Class climate	The class/ module atmosphere helped me to learn	The class/module atmosphere (vibe) helped me to learn
	The class/ module atmosphere encouraged the expression of diverse opinions/ and perspectives	The class/module atmosphere encouraged the expression of diverse opinions/ and perspective
	The lecturer treated all students respectfully	The lecturer treated all students respectfully
	The lecturer treated all students in the same way (equitably)	The lecturer treated all students fairly

The response scales of the institutional module evaluation instrument were also adapted across the three action research phases, based on feedback and stakeholder inputs, particularly inputs from TLMs and the APDC. In the first phase, all except four items on the questionnaire made use of a 4-point Likert scale on which respondents indicated to which extent they agreed or disagreed with a statement. In the first semester of the first phase, the response scales were: 1: Strongly agree, 2: Agree, 3: Disagree, 4: Strongly disagree. In the second semester the response scale was reversed to: 1: Strongly disagree, 2: Disagree, 3: Agree, and 4: Strongly agree, and this remained the order of responses for the second and third phases of the research. The responses of the first semester data were reverse coded before reliability tests were conducted on it, and also for the reporting of means and modes in this chapter. The remaining four items had a 4-point Likert scale on which respondents indicated the frequency of their involvement in certain activities, in the Teaching and Learning scale of the questionnaire (see **Table 6.2**). In the second semester, a new 5-point Likert response scale was also allocated to three items in the Teaching and Learning scale of the questionnaire for which respondents were expected to rate lecturers' preparedness for class and their language and presentation skills. **Table 6.3** provides an overview of the response scales of the questionnaire across the three research phases of this study.

Table 6.3: Response scales of module evaluation items

Items: Phase 1	Response Scales Phase 1	Items: Phase 2&3	Response Scales Phase 2&3
I understood the learning outcomes	Semester 1: 1: Strongly agree 2: Agree 3: Disagree 4: Strongly disagree Semester 2 1: Strongly Disagree 2: Disagree 3: Agree	I understood the learning outcomes	1: Strongly Disagree 2: Disagree 3: Agree 4: Strongly Agree
The content taught in the module related to the learning outcomes		The content (the work covered/contained in the module) related to the learning outcomes	
The learning materials helped me to learn		The learning materials helped me to learn	
I was satisfied with the library and/or digital resources available for this module		I was satisfied with the library and/or digital resources available for this module	
The module content prepared me for the assessment (assignments, tests,		The module content (the work covered/contained in the module) prepared me for the	

Items: Phase 1	Response Scales Phase 1	Items: Phase 2&3	Response Scales Phase 2&3
examinations)	4: Strongly Agree	assessment (assignments, tests, examinations)	
The assessment requirements for this module were clear		Item removed	
Feedback on my assessment was provided in the specified time (as indicated by the lecturer)		Feedback on my assessment was provided in the specified time (as indicated by the lecturer)	
The marking criteria were clearly specified		The marking criteria were clearly specified	
The feedback provided on my assessment tasks helped me to improve my performance		The feedback provided on my assessment tasks helped me to understand my mistakes	
The lecturer presented the material in a manner that helped me to learn		Rate your lecturer's presentation skills	1: Very Poor 2: Poor 3: Average 4: Good 5: Excellent
The lecturer was well prepared for class		Rate your lecturer's preparedness for class	
The lecturer spoke clearly and audibly		Rate your lecturer's language skills	
The use of technology in this module (e.g. Blackboard, mobile learning and other online tools) enhanced my learning		The use of technology in this module (e.g. Blackboard, mobile learning and other online tools) enhanced my learning	1: Strongly Disagree 2: Disagree 3: Agree 4: Strongly Agree
Adequate support was provided to help me be successful in this module (e.g. tutorials, additional learning material and/ or practical exercises)		Adequate support was provided to help me be successful in this module (such as tutorials, additional reading material and/or practical exercises)	
I felt motivated to learn for this module		I felt motivated to learn for this module	
The workload in this module was manageable		The workload in this module was manageable	
The lecturer sets high expectations		The lecturer expects students to do their best	
I asked questions and/ or participated in class discussions	1: Never 2: Sometimes 3: Often	I asked questions and/or participated in class discussions	1: Never 2: Sometimes 3: Often
I worked with other students in this module to complete		I worked with other students in this module to complete	

Items: Phase 1	Response Scales Phase 1	Items: Phase 2&3	Response Scales Phase 2&3
activities, tasks, assignments or assessments	4: Very Often	activities, tasks, assignments or assessments	4: Very Often
I communicated with my lecturer face to face		I communicated with my lecturer face to face (after class/during consultation hours)	
I communicated with my lecturer online (email, Facebook, Blackboard and so on).		I communicated with my lecturer online about the module (email, Facebook, Blackboard and so on)	
The class/ module atmosphere helped me to learn	1: Strongly Disagree 2: Disagree 3: Agree 4: Strongly Agree	The class/module atmosphere (vibe) helped me to learn	1: Strongly Disagree 2: Disagree 3: Agree 4: Strongly Agree
The class/ module atmosphere encouraged the expression of diverse opinions/ and perspectives		The class/module atmosphere encouraged the expression of diverse opinions/ and perspective	
The lecturer treated all students respectfully		The lecturer treated all students respectfully	
The lecturer treated all students in the same way (equitably)		The lecturer treated all students fairly	

For analysis purposes, the Teaching and Learning scale was divided into three sub-scales, because of the differing response scales of each across the phases. **Table 6.4** shows the items making up the three teaching and learning scales (TL1, TL2, and TL3) together with their response scales.

Table 6.4: Items making up the Teaching and Learning scales together with their response scales

Scale	Item: Original questionnaire (Phase 1: 2013)	Response scale	Item: Adapted questionnaire (Phase 2 & 3: 2014)	Response scale
TL1	The lecturer presented the material in a manner that helped me to learn	**Semester 1:** 1: Strongly agree 2: Agree 3: Disagree	Rate your lecturer's presentation skills	1: Very Poor 2: Poor 3: Average 4: Good
	The lecturer was well prepared for class		Rate your lecturer's preparedness for class	
	The lecturer spoke clearly		Rate your lecturer's	

Scale	Item: Original questionnaire (Phase 1: 2013)	Response scale	Item: Adapted questionnaire (Phase 2 & 3: 2014)	Response scale
	and audibly	4: Strongly disagree **Semester 2** 1: Strongly Disagree 2: Disagree 3: Agree 4: Strongly Agree	language skills	5: Excellent
TL2	The use of technology in this module (e.g. Blackboard, mobile learning and other online tools) enhanced my learning	**Semester 1:** 1: Strongly agree 2: Agree 3: Disagree 4: Strongly disagree **Semester 2** 1: Strongly Disagree 2: Disagree 3: Agree 4: Strongly Agree	The use of technology in this module (e.g. Blackboard, mobile learning and other online tools) enhanced my learning	1: Strongly Disagree 2: Disagree 3: Agree 4: Strongly Agree
	Adequate support was provided to help me be successful in this module (e.g. tutorials, additional learning material and/ or practical exercises)		Adequate support was provided to help me be successful in this module (such as tutorials, additional reading material and/or practical exercises)	
	I felt motivated to learn for this module		I felt motivated to learn for this module	
	The workload in this module was manageable		The workload in this module was manageable	
	The lecturer sets high expectations		The lecturer expects students to do their best	
TL3	I asked questions and/ or participated in class discussions	1: Never 2: Sometimes 3: Often 4: Very Often	I asked questions and/or participated in class discussions	1: Never 2: Sometimes 3: Often 4: Very Often
	I worked with other students in this module to complete activities, tasks, assignments or assessments		I worked with other students in this module to complete activities, tasks, assignments or assessments	
	I communicated with my lecturer face to face		I communicated with my lecturer face to face (after class/during consultation hours)	

Scale	Item: Original questionnaire (Phase 1: 2013)	Response scale	Item: Adapted questionnaire (Phase 2 & 3: 2014)	Response scale
	I communicated with my lecturer online (email, Facebook, Blackboard and so on).		I communicated with my lecturer online about the module (email, Facebook, Blackboard and so on)	

SPSS was used to calculate the reliability of the institutional module evaluation instrument before and after it was adapted. Cronbach's alpha, a coefficient of inter-item correlations (Cohen, et al., 2007), was calculated to determine internal consistency of the scales of the questionnaire. **Table 6.5** shows the Cronbach's alphas for each of the scales in the module evaluation instrument before and after adaptations.

Table 6.5: Reliability coefficients of original and adapted versions of the institutional module evaluation instrument

Scale	Cronbach's alpha: original instrument	Cronbach's alpha: adapted instrument
Module design and Learning Materials	0.84	0.84
Assessment	0.84	0.83
Teaching and Learning 1	0.87	0.86
Teaching and Learning 2	0.78	0.79
Teaching and Learning 3	0.65	0.72
Class Climate	0.83	0.80

A Cronbach alpha coefficient of higher than 0.7 is considered acceptable, while values of higher than 0.8 is preferable (Javali, Gudaganavar, & Raj, 2011). Generally, both the original instrument and the adapted version appear to be reliable. The module design and learning materials, assessment, and class climate scales had reliability coefficients of higher than the preferred 0.8 in both versions of the instrument. The first teaching and learning subscale (including items requiring students to rate their lecturers' preparedness, language and presentation skills) show very high reliability coefficients (0.87

and 0.86 respectively for both versions of the instrument). The second and third subscales of the teaching and learning scale had slightly lower reliability coefficients than the other scales of the instrument. The reliability coefficient of the third teaching and learning subscale increased from 0.65 for the original instrument to 0.72 for the adapted instrument which shows that the adaptation improved the instrument in this area quite substantially. The third teaching and learning subscale consists of the items where students indicate how often they participate in certain activities. Only one of the four items of this subscale was changed in the adapted version of the instrument: 'I communicated with my lecturer face to face', was changed to 'I communicated with my lecturer face to face (after class/ during consultation hours)'. A possible explanation for the increase of the reliability coefficient is that the phrase 'face to face' was ambiguous and interpreted in a number of different ways in the original questionnaire. The explanation of the phrase in the adapted version clarified the meaning, so improving the reliability.

On the whole though, it does not seem that the adaptation of the questionnaire had much of an effect on the reliability. Thus, based on statistical analysis alone, it seems that the institutional module evaluation questionnaire is a robust instrument. However, as will be shown in Chapter 7, the qualitative data points to specific nuances of understanding and interpretation that would be 'missed' in a purely quantitative analysis.

6.3 Module evaluation results

Although the scope of the research does not entail detailed analysis of the module evaluation results, it is useful to consider general trends over the three phases of the project. In addition, as will be seen in Chapter 7, students' evaluations of modules and lecturers' expectations of how students evaluate modules were not always consistent. This is important from an institutional systems point of view. Appendix F shows the average (mean) student ratings per faculty for all three action research phases. The mean values of the 4-point Likert scale items range between 2.9 and 3.6 across all faculties and across all three phases. **Table 6.6** shows the institutional modes (in other words, the most commonly

occurring score) and the mean ratings for each of the three action research phases. Most items were rated 3 (agree) in the first phase, but in the second and third phases most items were rated 4 (strongly agree). This is congruent with an increase in the institutional average ratings which increased from 3 in the first phase to 3.2 in both the second and third phases. This implies that although students were generally positive in the first phase of the research, they were even more positive in the second and third phases of the research, strongly agreeing with most of the statements. These results lend support to Nulty's observation that students tend to rate modules favourably, more often agreeing or strongly agreeing with positive statements (Nulty, 2008). This finding will be returned to in Chapter 7 when lecturers' responses to and concerns about the module evaluations are considered.

Of the 25 quantitative items (24 in phase 2 and 3), six items ask students to rate aspects specifically pertaining to the lecturer(s) of a module (see items highlighted dark grey in **Table 6.6**). These items were also the items for which the highest mean ratings were recorded across all three phases of the research. The overall mean rating per item is the average rating across all faculties for all three research phases.

It is important to note, however that three of these items were rated on a four-point scale (like the rest of the items on the questionnaire) in the first phase of the research, but were rated on a five-point scale in the adapted instrument used during the second and third phases of the study. These items were:

- The lecturer presented the material in a manner that helped me to learn
- The lecturer was well prepared for class
- The lecturer spoke clearly and audibly

The increase in the mean ratings of these items can thus be explained by the change in the response scale. Nonetheless, the modes of these three items (all three have a mode of 4 in the first phase and 5 in the second and third phase) show that students did generally give the highest possible rating for each of these items across all three phases of the research.

Table 6.6: Institutional means and modes of student ratings across the 3 action research phases

Theme	Items	Institutional Mean			Institutional Mode		
		Phases			Phases		
		1	2	3	1	2	3
Module design and learning materials	I understood the learning outcomes	3.2	3.3	3.4	3	3	4
	The content taught in the module related to the learning outcomes	3.3	3.4	3.5	3	4	4
	The learning materials helped me to learn	3.2	3.3	3.4	3	4	4
	I was satisfied with the library and/or digital resources available for this module	2.9	3.0	3.1	3	3	4
Assessment	The module content prepared me for the assessment (assignments, tests, examinations)	3.2	3.3	3.4	3	4	4
	The assessment requirements for this module were clear	3.2	-	-	3	-	-
	Feedback on my assessment was provided in the specified time (as indicated by the lecturer)	3.1	3.2	3.3	3	4	4
	The marking criteria were clearly specified	3	3.2	3.3	3	4	4
	The feedback provided on my assessment tasks helped me to improve my performance	2.9	3.0	3.1	3	4	4
Teaching and Learning	The lecturer presented the material in a manner that helped me to learn[18]	**3.2**	**4.1**	**4.2**	**4**	**5**	**5**
	The lecturer was well prepared for class[1]	**3.5**	**4.4**	**4.5**	**4**	**5**	**5**
	The lecturer spoke clearly and audibly[1]	**3.4**	**4.3**	**3.4**	**4**	**5**	**5**
	The use of technology in this module (e.g. Blackboard, mobile learning and other online tools) enhanced my learning	3.1	3.2	3.2	3	4	4
	Adequate support was provided to help me be successful in this module (e.g. tutorials, additional learning material and/ or practical exercises)	3.0	3.2	3.2	3	4	4
	I felt motivated to learn for this module	3.1	3.2	3.2	3	4	4
	The workload in this module was manageable	3.0	3.2	3.1	3	3	3
	The lecturer sets high expectations	3.1	3.6	3.6	3	4	4
	I asked questions and/ or participated in class discussions	**2.0**	**2.4**	**2.5**	**2**	**2**	**2**

[18] Items were rated on a 5-point scale in the adapted version of the questionnaire.

Theme	Items	Institutional Mean			Institutional Mode		
		Phases			Phases		
		1	2	3	1	2	3
	I worked with other students in this module to complete activities, tasks, assignments or assessments	**2.6**	**2.9**	**2.8**	3	4	4
	I communicated with my lecturer face to face	**2.1**	**2.4**	**2.5**	**2**	**2**	**3**
	I communicated with my lecturer online (email, Facebook, Blackboard and so on).	**1.6**	**1.8**	**2**	**1**	**1**	**1**
Class climate	The class/ module atmosphere helped me to learn	3.0	3.1	3.2	3	3	3
	The class/ module atmosphere encouraged the expression of diverse opinions/ and perspectives	3.0	3.1	3.2	3	3	3
	The lecturer treated all students respectfully	**3.5**	**3.6**	**3.7**	**4**	**4**	**4**
	The lecturer treated all students in the same way (equitably)	**3.5**	**3.6**	**3.7**	**4**	**4**	**4**

The lowest overall average (mean) ratings of the questionnaire, which were the only four items that had overall average ratings of below 3, are shaded light grey in **Table 6.6**. These were the only four items on the questionnaire (for all three phases) where students had to indicate the frequency of their involvement in certain activities, rather than agreeing or disagreeing with statements (or rating lecturer skills). Of these four items, three also had the lowest modes (highlighted light grey in table 6.6). The item with the lowest mode (1) across all three phases was "I communicated with my lecturer online", indicating that most students never communicate with their lecturers online, despite significant institutional investment in and promotion of the use of the Blackboard learning management system. These items constitute subscale 3 of the Teaching and Learning scale (TL3), which is also the scale with the lowest reliability coefficients (0.65 and 0.72) of all the scales in both the original and adapted versions of the questionnaire. This may indicate that students interpret the response scale differently, meaning that what one student interprets as 'often' may be what another student interprets as 'sometimes'.

Interestingly, an item with a low overall mean, compared to the other items on the questionnaire (2.6, 2.8 and 2.9 respectively in each of the phases), "I worked with other students in this module to complete activities, tasks, assignments or assessment" was not an item with a low mode. This item had modes of 3, 4 and 4 in each of the phases respectively. This indicates that the mean is likely to have been skewed by some particularly low ratings, even though the most frequent single response is that students often (phase 1) or very often (phase 2 and 3) work with other students.

Although lecturers play an integral role in a module and have control over certain aspects of a module, they do not have control over all aspects of the module. For example, lecturers can create an environment that encourages students to participate in class, but ultimately lecturers do not have control over whether students make use of the opportunities created for class participation. The aspects over which lecturers do have control, were consistently rated higher than the other items on the questionnaire across faculties and throughout all three phases of the research. The two items with the highest overall mean ratings (only including items where the same response scale was used across all three research phases) are shown in **Figure 6.2**. This shows that students generally believe that their lecturers treated them respectfully and equitably. In Chapter 7, the qualitative data from lecturer interviews is presented and many lecturers reported feeling vulnerable when being rated by students (see section 7.2.2.5). However, from this quantitative data it appears that the vulnerability that lecturers feel when it comes to module evaluations may be unfounded.

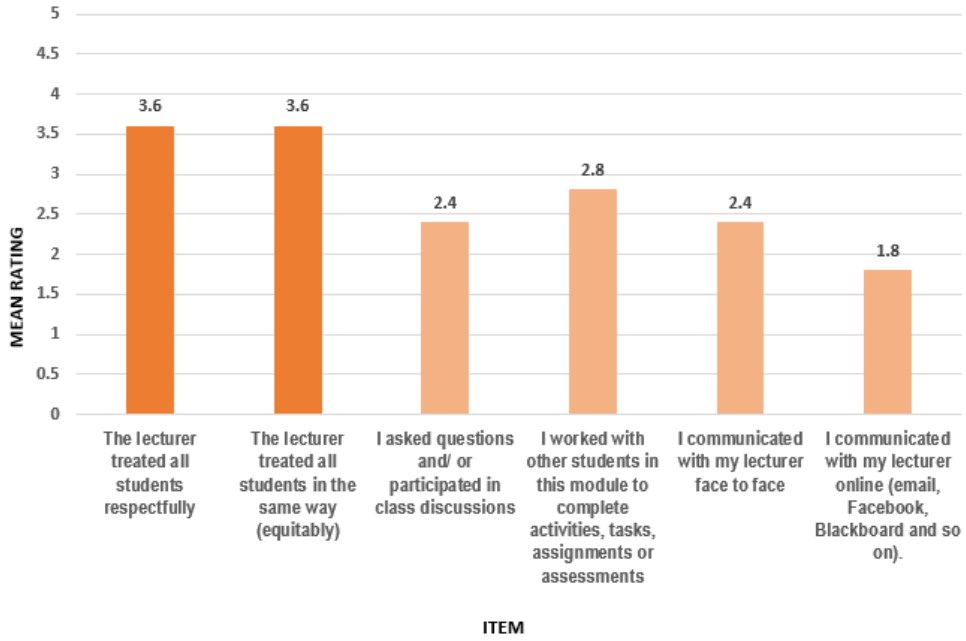


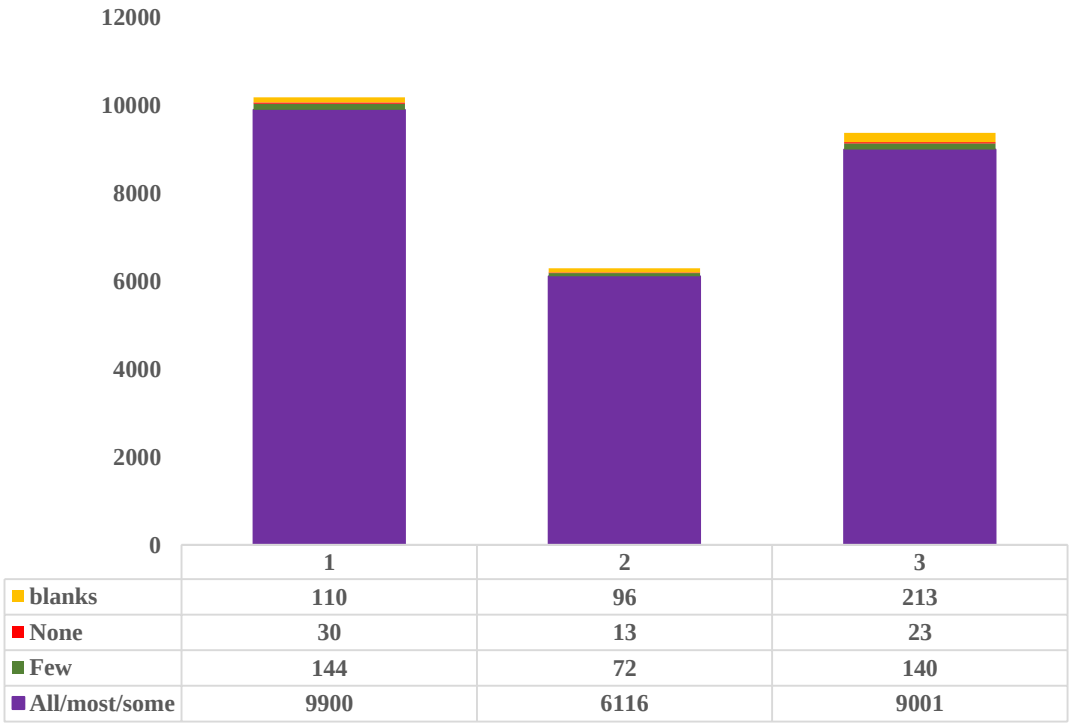
Figure 6.2: Items with highest and lowest overall ratings.

The lowest rated items suggest that students only sometimes ask questions or participate in class, work with other students on group activities (although as explained above, this item did not have a low mode), or communicate with the lecturer face to face and never online. These items relate to students' involvement in class and their relationship with others involved in the module (other students and the lecturer). One possible explanation for not participating in class and not communicating with the lecturer face to face or online, may be large classes. It is typically more difficult for students to actively participate in large classes as they are more likely to be able to "hide" and are generally more anxious to participate in discussions in classes with a large number of students (Rocca, 2010). Several large classes (of a 1000 plus students) were included in the module evaluation pilot and so this is a likely explanation for the relatively low class participation – although further data and more in-depth analysis at the level of the classroom would be needed to confirm this[19].

Lecturers also raised concerns about students not attending classes, but still completing the module evaluation questionnaire (see section 7.2.2.1). They were of the opinion that students who did not attend class were more likely to give lower ratings on aspects they had not experienced, than students

[19] The CLASSE could provide useful data in this regard.

who had attended class, effectively skewing the results. However, as **Figure 6.3** shows, very few students indicated that they attended no or few classes. The vast majority of students who completed module evaluation questionnaires across all three phases of this study, indicated that they attended all, most or some of their classes. Since module evaluations are anonymous, it is unlikely that responses on this item were significantly biased.



	1	2	3
blanks	110	96	213
None	30	13	23
Few	144	72	140
All/most/some	9900	6116	9001

Figure 6.3: Breakdown of class attendance of students who completed the questionnaire in each of the three action research phases.

It appears as if students who did not attend class, generally did not complete the questionnaire, even if they did have the opportunity to do so though the online method. It could thus be argued that students who do not attend class are less likely to provide feedback on the module by completing a module evaluation questionnaire. Although this is self-reported data, and it is possible that students may indicate that they attended class when they did not, the fact that questionnaires are completed anonymously should largely overcome this challenge.

In order to assess whether there was any general change in the ratings across the three phases, an overall average (mean) was calculated. To accurately compare the ratings across the phases, only the items that were not changed were included so that the comparison is across identical items. There were 12 items that did not change, and these were used to calculate the overall averages shown below. An overall institutional average (mean) of 3 was obtained (including ratings for all three research phases).This did not differ much from the average ratings obtained per faculty. The faculty of Theology obtained a slightly higher average than the other faculties, with a mean rating of 3.1. **Figure 6.4** shows the average ratings per faculty compared to the overall institutional average.

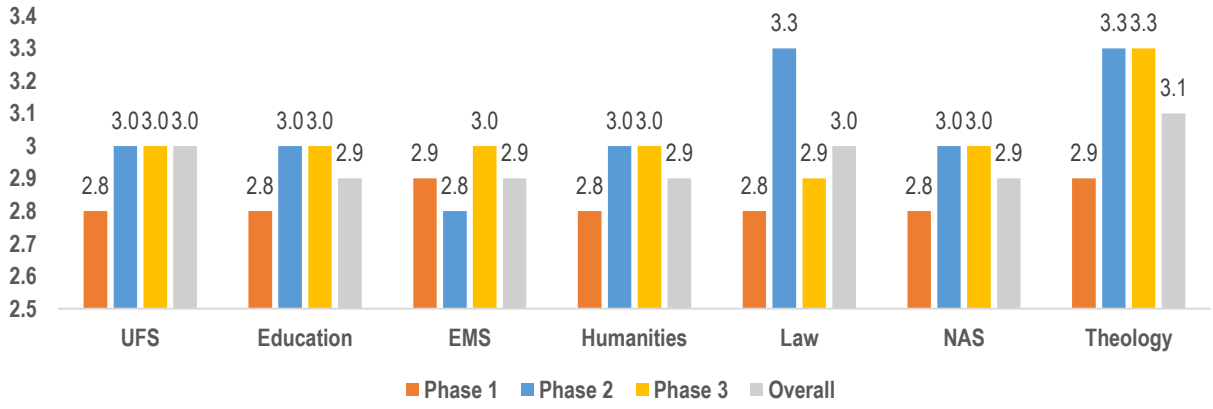


Figure 6.4: Average ratings per faculty for all three research phases.

A slight upward trend in rating is visible from phase 1 to 3. Ratings were slightly higher in phase 2 than in phase 1 for all faculties (except Economic and Management Sciences which had a lower rating), and the institution as a whole. The faculty of Law, specifically, had a much higher average rating in the second phase than in the first. The data was further explored in an effort to understand this spike, yet there appears to be nothing in the data or in the context of how module evaluations were conducted that can explain the spike. The institutional average, as well as averages for the faculties of Education, the Humanities, Natural and Agricultural Sciences, and Theology were the same in the second and third phases. The faculty of Economic and Management Sciences had a higher average in the third phase than in the second, while the faculty of Law had a lower average rating in the third phase than in the second.

The average ratings for each faculty and throughout the three research phases show that students are mostly positive about the various aspects of their modules that were evaluated. However, their ratings do suggest relatively low participation in class and a lack of one-on-one communication between students and lecturers. Future research at the classroom level to understand these findings is important in terms of quality enhancement.

It was promising to see that the ratings improved from phase 1 to phase 3, albeit slightly, considering that it is over a period of only two years. It will be useful to see if the ratings keep improving in the long term, and if they do, to investigate why ratings are improving. Are lecturers making changes to their modules based on student feedback leading to students being more satisfied with the module overall? Is a culture of evaluating modules being established where more and more modules are evaluated regularly and more and more students are completing evaluations? Do these ratings provide evidence of improvements in teaching and learning as a result of the many academic staff development initiatives that have been and currently are underway? These are questions that should be asked as the institutional module evaluation progresses, because in this way, module evaluation data can begin to support processes of quality enhancement.

6.4 Response rates

Concerns about response rates were an issue commonly raised by lecturers and TLMs in the interviews conducted in the first and second phases of the study (see Chapter 7). One of the reasons that lecturers prefer hardcopy module evaluations is that this method yields higher response rates than online evaluations. This claim is supported by the literature which suggests that higher response rates are often obtained by traditional paper-pencil methods of evaluation than evaluations delivered electronically (Avery et al., 2006; Dommeyer et al., 2004; Stowell et al., 2012).

There are several reasons why low response rates are detrimental to the module evaluation process. Low response rates mean that the results are not necessarily a true reflection of the majority of

students enrolled for a module and according to some lecturers, this is a reason to discard the results entirely. It also shows a lack of interest on the part of the student to provide feedback. This might point to ineffective institutional processes of listening to student voices or perhaps to the nature of the teaching and learning relationship between students and the institution or students and their specific lecturers. Each of these possible reasons is detrimental to the quality of teaching and learning. Hence, it is important to explore patterns with respect to response rates in some detail, and to try to identify ways in which to improve response rates (specific suggestions provided by students are presented in Chapter 7).

Table 6.7 provides an overview of response rates obtained per faculty over all three research phases. It shows a clear difference between response rates for modules evaluated online compared to modules evaluated with the paper-based method (see Chapter 7 for an explanation of what each method entails procedurally). Where cells do not contain a value it is because that method was not used at all by a specific faculty.

Table 6.7: Response rates and evaluation methods for all three research phases per faculty

	Phase 1		Phase 2		Phase 3	
	Online	Paper	Online	Paper	Online	Paper
UFS	15%	46%	17%	34%	23%	45%
Education	10%	-	11%	-	14%	11%
EMS	14%	69%	12%	38%	17%	60%
Humanities	7%	34%	12%	32%	10%	51%
NAS	17%	53%	31%	28%	19%	70%
Theology	26%	-	17%	-	35%	-
Law	14%	50%	19%	37%	45%	34%

Paper-based evaluations consistently have higher response rates than online evaluations. The only exception is in the faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences in phase 2, where a higher response rate was obtained for the online method (31%) than the hardcopy method (28%). In fact, the online response rate was particularly high in the second phase compared to the online response rates of the other two phases (17% and 19% respectively) for the faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences,

while its hardcopy response rate was particularly low compared to the other two phases. It is unclear why this was the case, as there were no obvious changes in the manner in which the evaluations took place in the faculty over the three phases. A possible reason for lower response rates obtained by using the online method, may be that students are usually expected to complete online evaluations in their free time, while hardcopy evaluations are completed in class-time. In addition, one way of distributing online module evaluations, is by sending an email to the official student email addresses of students enrolled in the relevant module with a link to the survey. Many students, however, do not use their official UFS email addresses and make use of personal email addresses which are not always stored on UFS databases. The online and hardcopy module evaluation processes are described in section 7.4 of Chapter 7.

For the most part, however, paper evaluations produced higher response rates than online evaluations. An increase in the number of paper evaluations evaluated from phase 1 to phase 3 is shown in **Table 6.8** below.

Table 6.8: Comparison of number of online and paper evaluations completed per faculty

Method	Education	EMS	Humanities	Law	NAS	Theology	UFS
Phase 1							
Online	1014	3314	439	376	1235	135	6513
Paper	0	167	3033	352	63	0	3669
Phase 2							
Online	198	521	531	254	402	18	1924
Paper	0	74	3896	63	343	0	4376
Phase 3							
Online	213	739	133	1027	1074	104	3290
Paper	12	24	5145	196	439	0	5816

The majority of modules were evaluated online in the first phase, while most evaluations were completed on paper in the second and third phases. The hardcopy version of the institutional questionnaire was longer than the questionnaires that were used in the faculties before the institutional module evaluation pilot. As departments were expected to cover the costs of printing, it is not surprising that most modules were evaluated online in the first phase. The faculty of the Humanities was the only faculty that paid for hardcopy evaluations from a central budget, therefore explaining

why most modules are evaluated with the hardcopy method in this faculty. Given the low response rates of online evaluations, however, as time progressed more lecturers opted for the paper evaluations.

Overall, the online response rates have increased slightly from phase 1 to phase 3. One possible reason for this may be that the institution is adapting to this as a method of evaluation. This is plausible because the online method was only introduced for the first time during phase 1 of this study. If the response rates of modules evaluated online continue to increase over time, it is possible that more lecturers will prefer to have their modules evaluated online. This is purely because this method requires less work from a lecturer and results are received more quickly than results of hardcopy evaluations.

6.4.1 Response rates of interviewed lecturers

Response rates of the lecturers who were interviewed in the first phase of the action research study (see Chapter 7 for a discussion of the interview findings), are shown in **Table 6.9**. The table also categorises response rates into high, average and low response rates. The categories were determined by comparing the actual response rate that the lecturer obtained, with the response rate of the relevant faculty in the first phase of the research (since lecturers were interviewed in the first phase). Response rates within a range of 5% of the faculty average were classified as average, and are highlighted in yellow in **Table 6.9**. Response rates of more than 5% higher than the faculty response rate were classified as high, and highlighted green in **Table 6.9**, while response rates of more than 5% lower than the faculty response rate were classified as low and highlighted in red in **Table 6.9**. Where lecturers were involved in more than 1 module that was evaluated in the first phase of the research, an average response rate was calculated.

Table 6.9: Response rates of interviewed lecturers

Lecturer	Faculty	Method	Response rate
Lecturer 1	Education	Online	12%
Lecturer 2	EMS	Online	19%
Lecturer 3	EMS	Online	6%
Lecturer 4	Humanities	Paper	25%
Lecturer 5	Humanities	Paper	28%
Lecturer 6	NAS	Online	22%
Lecturer 7	NAS	Online	32%
Lecturer 8	NAS	Online	4%
Lecturer 9	NAS	Online	1%
Lecturer 10	NAS	Online	33%
Lecturer 11	Theology	Online	33%
Lecturer 12	Theology	Online	22%
Lecturer 13	Humanities	Paper	40%
Lecturer 14	Education	Online	0%
Lecturer 15	EMS	Online	95%
Lecturer 16	EMS	Online	24%
Lecturer 17	EMS	Online	10%
Lecturer 18	EMS	Online	29%
Lecturer 19	Humanities	Paper	38%
Lecturer 20	Education	Online	22%
Lecturer 21	Humanities	Online	0%
Lecturer 22	NAS	Online	0%
Lecturer 23	NAS	Online	10%
Lecturer 24	Education	Online	83%
Lecturer 25	Humanities	Online	14%

As can be seen in **Table 6.9**, a relatively even distribution of lecturers who obtained high, low and average response rates were interviewed. Indeed, including lecturers with different response rates for their modules was part of the sampling criteria (see Chapter 5). In the lecturer interviews it was established that lecturers 5, 8, 13, 15 and 18 spent a considerable amount of time and energy encouraging students to complete module evaluations. These lecturers achieved this by reminding students continuously to complete evaluations (in cases where evaluations were done online) and explaining the importance of their feedback in improving modules (see Chapter 7 for a detailed account of the findings of the lecturer interviews). Despite this encouragement, which is identified in

the literature as one strategy for achieving high response rates (Ballantyne, 2003; Crews & Curtis, 2011), lecturers 5 and 8 achieved low response rates compared to response rates obtained in the rest of the modules evaluated in their faculties. Furthermore, lecturers 7, 10, 14, and 22 did not encourage students to complete the evaluations and were generally indifferent about the module evaluation process. Yet, lecturers 7 and 10 obtained high response rates compared to the other modules evaluated in their faculty. These findings highlight the complexity of the module evaluation system. There are most likely a number of variables that influence response rates, which must be considered when planning an intervention to increase response rates. These complexities are further explored in Chapter 7, drawing on the qualitative data.

6.5 Conclusion

In this chapter adaptations made to the institutional module evaluation from the first to the third phase of this study were covered, including changes to the response scales of the questionnaire. Module evaluation results across the three phases of the research were presented, including mean ratings as well as modes. Items with the highest and lowest averages and modes were discussed in some detail. The results showed that students were generally positive about aspects of the module over which lecturers had control thus contradicting lecturers' concerns that students may use module evaluations as a tool to get 'back at them', an issue that is picked up in Chapter 7. Finally, response rates were presented for the institution and per faculty and the trends over the period of the two years of this study were discussed. Although response rates of online evaluations are generally lower than response rates of paper evaluations, there has been a slight increase in the response rates of the online evaluations over the three research phases. The chapter was concluded by presenting response rates of each of the lecturers who were interviewed. In the next chapter qualitative findings, exploring primary stakeholders' (namely, lecturers', students' and TLMs') experiences of module evaluations at the UFS, are presented, so allowing for a richer interpretation of the quantitative trends documented here.

Chapter 7: Qualitative Research Findings

7.1 Introduction

The qualitative data used in this study was collected during all three action research phases. During all of these phases, primary stakeholders which included students, lecturers, and TLMs were consulted. Changes were implemented in the subsequent phase based on the data gathered in the prior phase. The three phases of the research are illustrated in **Figure 7.1.** As was noted in the chapter outline in Chapter 1, this is a lengthy chapter. In order to ensure that the richness of the qualitative data is reflected in the findings it was necessary to allocate more space to this chapter than the others.

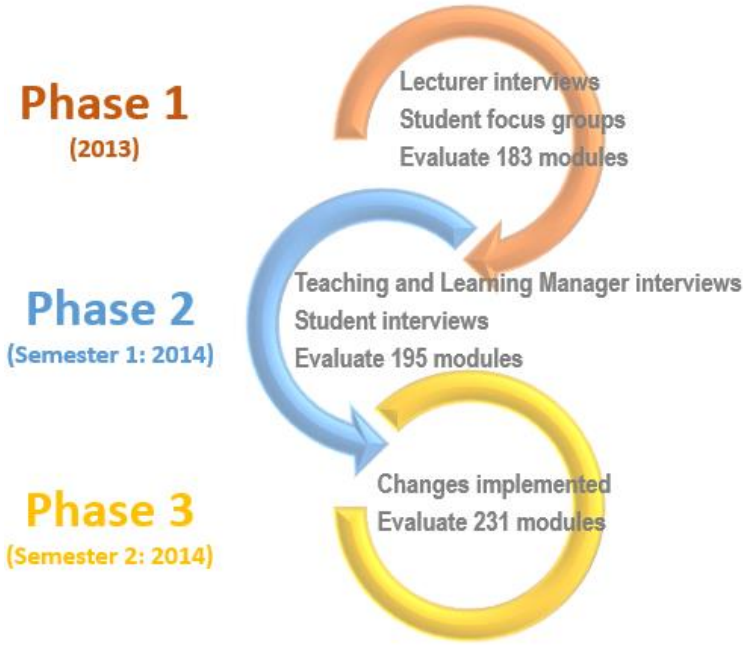


Figure 7.1: Illustration of the data collection in the three research phases of the study.

The reader is reminded of the first two research sub-questions of this study, namely:

1. How do primary stakeholders (students, lecturers and TLMs) experience module evaluations?
2. How can these experiences be used to enhance module evaluation procedures?

7.2 Lecturers

During the first phase of the research a total of 25 lecturers were interviewed (see **Figure 7.2**) to explore their experiences of module evaluations at the University of the Free State. Lecturers were from all six faculties which participated in the institutional module evaluation pilot and all from different departments within these faculties. Furthermore, participants included lecturers with a wide range of experience, some lecturing for less than five years, others with more than 15 years' experience.

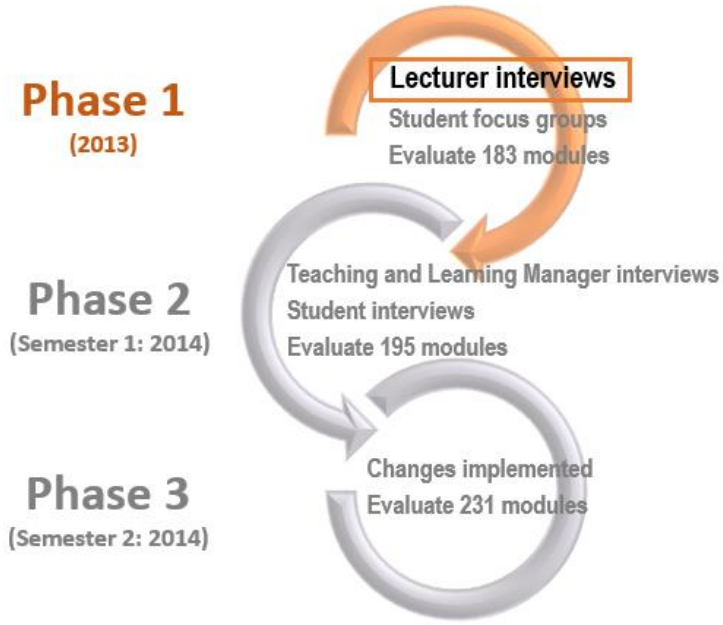


Figure 7.2: Illustration of the phases of data collection, highlighting where data was collected from lecturers.

Table 7.1 provides an overview of the demographic profile of lecturers who were interviewed in this study. The demographic profile of the lecturers who participated in the study was diverse as lecturers from all faculties (except the Faculty of Law[20]) that participated in the institutional module evaluation

[20] The Faculty of Law only joined the institutional module evaluation pilot at the end of the first semester of 2014 by which time the selection of participants had already taken place.

pilot were included, lecturers providing instruction in both English and Afrikaans were included, as well as male and female lecturers with a wide range of teaching experience.

Table 7.1: Demographic profile of interviewed lecturers

	N	%
Gender		
Females	10	40%
Males	15	60%
Race		
Black	9	36%
White	15	60%
Other	1	4%
Language		
Afrikaans	12	48%
English	13	52%
Teaching experience		
0 – 2 years	6	24%
3 – 5 years	7	28%
6 – 10 years	3	12%
More than 10 years	9	36%
Faculty		
Economic and Management Sciences	6	24%
Education	4	16%
Humanities	6	24%
Natural and Agricultural Sciences	7	28%
Theology	2	8%

The first sub-question is directly addressed in this section as lecturers' (one group of primary stakeholders of module evaluations) experiences of module evaluations were explored in these interviews. The second question will be comprehensively addressed in Chapter 8 that builds on the findings presented here, as I reflect on how lecturer experiences can enhance module evaluation procedures. **Table 7.2** is a summary of the themes that emerged in the lecturer interviews. Each of these themes is discussed in more detail in the following sections of this chapter.

Table 7.2: Emergent themes in lecturer interviews

Theme	Sub-theme
Overall experience of module evaluations	Overall experience of module evaluations before the institutional pilot
	Overall experience of institutional module evaluation pilot
Module evaluation process	Preferred method of evaluating modules
	Interacting with students in the module evaluation process
	How lecturers use module evaluation results
	Lecturers' recommendations for improving the module evaluation process

Theme	Sub-theme
Module evaluations as a double edged sword	

7.2.1 Lecturers' overall experience of module evaluations

As already discussed, in 2013 institutional module evaluations were piloted which brought about several changes in the module evaluation processes that were in place at the university. Before the institutional module evaluation initiative, module evaluations were compulsory in some departments but not in others. There was thus an existing culture of gathering formal student feedback in some departments prior to this institutional intervention, while others were now required to participate in a process they had never been expected to participate in before. Moreover, previously, each faculty had used its own instrument for module evaluations, whereas now, a common institutional instrument was used for all modules included in the pilot. This is because one of the purposes of institutional module evaluations was specifically to ensure that modules were evaluated in a more consistent manner across all faculties and departments to allow for data aggregation and comparison.

In addition, modules were exclusively evaluated with the hardcopy method before the pilot, and mostly at the very end of the semester, just before examinations. With institutional module evaluations lecturers were given the option to evaluate their modules electronically for the first time, but could still choose to evaluate their modules with the hardcopy method if they wished. There were, however, differences between the hardcopy method during the pilot and the method used before the pilot. Before the pilot students were given the questionnaire and an optical form on which the questionnaire was completed and then scanned. Responses to open-ended questions were captured individually usually by administrative support staff within departments. The software program used for module evaluations during the pilot, EvaSys, allowed for electronic and hardcopy evaluations and stored all data centrally. Manual capturing of data was not necessary as the results (generated automatically by the program) included scanned copies of responses to open-ended questions as well. Students were not required to complete optical forms in this case, but had to complete the

questionnaire on printed A4 sheets of paper, each with a unique barcode linked to each individual module. The initial institutional questionnaire (see Appendices A and B) amounted to six pages, which could be printed back to back. Printing costs were charged to the department of the lecturer electing to use the hardcopy method, with the exception of the Faculty of the Humanities which funded printing of hardcopy questionnaires of all departments and individuals from a central faculty budget.

7.2.1.1 Lecturers' overall experience of module evaluations before the institutional pilot

Lecturers experienced module evaluations before the institutional intervention predominantly negatively. The main causes for the dissatisfaction were either a result of the procedure or administration of module evaluations at the university, issues with the concept of module evaluations in its entirety, or in some cases both. In other words negativity could be concerned with *how* modules were evaluated, or with the *idea* of module evaluations as a whole, or both. Among those that opposed module evaluations by students in its entirety, this was commonly because lecturers felt that students were not in a position, be it academically, emotionally, or in terms of experience, to evaluate modules. This is illustrated with by the quotes below:

> *"I mean students don't have the capacity to really evaluate the lecturer ... They are not in [sic] that level to evaluate someone who is higher than them in terms of knowledge". (Lecturer 19).*

> *"So sometimes I wonder to what extent they [students] really take it [module evaluations] seriously and whether they understand the teaching and learning jargon. Teaching and learning have specific words/terms and I sometimes wonder if they understand the terms." (Lecturer 5, translated from Afrikaans[21]).*

> *"How can a student reflect on the relevance of a textbook? A lot of time and energy goes into deciding if it is the correct textbook and that the correct study material is prepared. To me, there are*

[21] Original Afrikaans text: "So soms wonder ek in hoe 'n mate vat hulle dit ernstig op en dan verstaan hulle die 'jargon' rondom onderrig en leer. Onderrig en leer het sekere spesifieke woorde/terme en dan wonder ek partymaal of hulle die terme verstaan?"

some questions in the previous system as well as in the current system which I think students cannot comment on". (Lecturer 3, translated from Afrikaans[22]).

This shows that some lecturers were of the opinion that students did not take the evaluations seriously or that only very satisfied or dissatisfied students, in other words, the extreme cases, completed the evaluations, thus yielding inaccurate or invalid results. These lecturers, therefore, did not take the results seriously as they believed that the voice of the neutral student, a group to which the majority of students belong, was missing from the data. As Lecturer 9 put it:

"It is more or less the guys that like you a lot or the guys who do not like you at all that evaluate you and the silent masses in the middle, disappear in the process". (Lecturer 9, translated from Afrikaans[23])

Some participants also indicated that not all students could be relied on to complete evaluations fairly. For example, students could give poor ratings to a lecturer that they disliked or because they did not get good test marks. Thus, students could allow their emotions to cloud their judgement, once again rendering results inaccurate and unusable. Similar findings were reported in the literature review (see Campbell & Bozeman, 2007).

In addition, there were several aspects around the administration and procedure of evaluating modules that some lecturers pointed out as ineffective. Firstly, the lack of formal procedures governing module evaluations caused uncertainty and a lack of ownership from the lecturers' side. The lack of procedures also caused module evaluations to be conducted inconsistently across faculties and even departments. Even in cases where module evaluations were compulsory, actually using the results was not. Furthermore, evaluating a module at the very end of a semester left no time to reflect on the feedback, to implement any changes, or to discuss the feedback with the group of students who were evaluated. Some lecturers also disliked the hardcopy method because it required them to sacrifice class time for module evaluations, as the quotation below from Lecturer 15 suggests:

[22] Original Afrikaans text: "Hoe kan 'n student oor 'n handboek refleksie gee? Daar gaan soveel tyd en energie in om te kyk of dit die regte handboek is, die regte studiemateriaal voorberei word. Daar is vir my sekere vrae binne die vorige bedeling en die huidige bedeling wat ek dink net nie studente kan daaroor repliek lewer nie".
[23] Original Afrikaans text: "Dan is dit min of meer die ouens wat baie van jou hou of die ouens wat glad nie van jou hou nie wat jou evalueer en die stille massas, hulle verdwyn in die proses".

> *"The only thing that was a disadvantage was the fact that we had to have a scheduled time in class. So, because the semester was already so crammed that posed a problem" (Lecturer 15).*

Many of the participants, however, acknowledged that student feedback can be valuable and that it is necessary to gather feedback from students. However, not all are necessarily of the opinion that formal module evaluations are the most effective way of going about this task. Another positive aspect of module evaluations prior to the institutional module evaluation pilot experienced by some participants was that when modules were evaluated by means of the hardcopy method and during class time, only feedback from students that actually attended class was gathered. This means that students who did not attend class, and consequently who did not have sufficient experience and exposure to respond to all the aspects of the questionnaire, had no way of evaluating the modules. Thus, the results were a more accurate reflection of the views of students who had at least attended class. This was an issue that a few lecturers felt very strongly about as quotes from lecturer 3 and 5 show:

> *"For me it was a true reflection because it was probably the students who attended class [that completed the evaluations]. It felt to me like it was an honest or good reflection of the students who were in class, so there was no opportunity for people to just respond". (Lecturer 3, translated from Afrikaans[24])*

> *"Then, sits in your last class, the poor soul who maybe attended class twice but who is definitely in the last class because he wants to hear what the examination will be about, and that student evaluates you. How objective is it then really?" (Lecturer 5, translated from Afrikaans[25])*

However, this concern may be unwarranted. A biographical item in the institutional questionnaire asks how often the respondent attended class. In Chapter 6 (see section 6.3) the results across all three research phases show that the vast majority of students who complete module evaluation questionnaires indicated that they attend all, most or some of their classes. This indicates that students who never attend class or attend few classes probably do not complete module evaluation questionnaires. The quantitative data thus shows that lecturers' perception about who completes

[24] Original Afrikaans text: "Dit was vir my 'n getroue weergawe want dit was waarskynlik die studente wat klas bygewoon het. Dit het vir my gevoel dit was 'n eerlike of 'n goeie refleksie van die studente wat in die klas was, so daar was nie 'n geleentheid gewees vir mense wat net kon respondeer nie".
[25] Original Afrikaans text: "Dan sit in jou laaste klas, die arme siel wat miskein twee keer klas bygewoon het, maar definitief in die laaste klas is want hy wil hoor waaroor die eksamen gaan en daardie student evalueer jou. Hoe objektief is dit dan regtig?"

online evaluations may not be accurate which, if addressed, may ultimately lead to a more lecturers embracing the online method of evaluation.

7.2.1.2 Lecturers' overall experience of institutional module evaluation pilot

Generally, lecturers experienced the pilot positively compared to how module evaluations were conducted previously. One of the aspects that was especially well-received by some lecturers was that modules could be evaluated online in students' own time. Not being present when students completed the evaluations also meant that they could not influence a student's responses. More accurate results could thus be obtained in this way.

> *"It is one of the initiatives that I will support because it doesn't interfere with our time and it is done by students confidentially in their spare time". (Lecturer 17).*

> *"I know my presence could put some form of pressure on them, so you see, this is a little more objective since they are all by themselves". (Lecturer 16).*

They also liked the reports and the format of the reports with the evaluation results. Some participants mentioned that, although 2013 may not have been the first year that they had participated in the module evaluation process, it was the first time that they had actually received results. Even if lecturers had received module evaluation results in the past, they were generally positive about the format in which results were presented and especially that the report included all the responses to open-ended questions. Other aspects participants were positive about included the questionnaire, the option to evaluate modules electronically, that an institutional process ensures that the process is conducted in a more consistent and fair manner, and that it eliminates an element of uncertainty if everybody is expected to go through the same process, using the same questionnaire.

Although lecturers experienced the pilot process predominantly positively there were some lecturers that made mention of negative aspects of the process. The majority of negative comments related to low response rates of the modules that were evaluated online. Although, some of the participants that mentioned low response rates did add that if students had time to adapt to the method and if a couple

of changes were made to the way in which online evaluations are conducted, response rates may increase over time.

> *"The disappointing thing was, and I kind of knew this was going to happen, is that the number of students who responded was miniscule compared to previous years, because previously they would have all been in class. I would hand it out and everybody would respond". (Lecturer 23).*

Furthermore, there were also some lecturers that did not like the online method and would have preferred to have their module evaluated with the hardcopy method, but were prevented from doing so as their departments/faculties did not cover the cost of printing. Some of the reasons for preferring hardcopy evaluations included that it yields better response rates and that students who actually attend class complete evaluations. Preferences for the two methods of evaluation are covered in more detail in section 7.2.2.1 of this chapter.

In summary, the pilot project was generally experienced positively by lecturers compared to the previous module evaluation system. Some lecturers particularly liked that online evaluations did not cut into their class time, although not all lecturers preferred the online method. They liked the format of the results and that institutional module evaluations ensure more consistency within the process. Low response rates were the main concern with the institutional process, along with being forced to evaluate modules online due to the costs of printing having to be covered by the department. This eliminated the opportunity to choose a method of evaluation in some faculties.

7.2.2 Module evaluation process

In order to understand lecturers' experience of the module evaluations and to ultimately understand how these experiences can be used to enhance current module evaluation procedures, there needs to be a specific focus on lecturers' experiences of the process of evaluating modules. Participants in this study shared their experiences concerning several aspects of this process including: preferred method of evaluation, engaging students in the process of module evaluation, how module evaluation results are used, and specific recommendations, from a lecturer point of view, to improve the module evaluation process. These findings will be presented below.

7.2.2.1 Lecturers' preferred module evaluation method

Lecturers had a slight preference toward hardcopy evaluations despite experiencing several aspects of the online method positively. This was mainly because after the first round of the institutional pilot, which was simultaneously also the first round of electronic evaluations, modules evaluated with the hardcopy method yielded higher response rates. Higher response rates were, in most cases, one of the motivations for preferring the hardcopy method.

> *"I will actually say my preference was based on having all the students in one place all filling the evaluation forms, that's why I said paper. I know with online it is a matter of students having to fill it in in their own time" (Lecturer 22)*

> *"The class one [hardcopy method], I think it is the most effective one, because with the online one it is optional. You do not know whether they are going to complete it or not, but in class, because they are given the forms they obviously then have to complete it. The online one could have been the best but there is the danger that many students will just ignore it" (Lecturer13)*

One of the main reasons for preferring hardcopy evaluations is that it allowed only students who attended class to complete the evaluations. Despite the slight majority of participants leaning toward a preference for hardcopy evaluations, many participants still indicated a preference for electronic evaluations. This is mainly because the electronic method is convenient for lecturers as it does not interfere with class time (except if the lecturer booked a computer laboratory for the class session with the goal of having students complete electronic evaluations in class). These lecturers also view electronic evaluations as keeping up with the times. The quote below encapsulates the reasoning of many of the participants:

> *"The online method is easier. It is much less admin. Although the online method is easier, your response rate will be much better with the hardcopy method and you can explain the importance of it [module evaluations] while you are handing out the questionnaires. On the other hand, students may feel pressured to give positive feedback which they may not feel if they complete it online where there is nobody watching over their shoulder, nobody who can see what they have written. They can write*

what they want to. Both [methods] have their pros and cons". (Lecturer 8, translated from Afrikaans[26]).

It should be highlighted that the first phase of the institutional pilot was the first time modules were evaluated online and that there were no guidelines or process in place for evaluating modules online. It may be possible that over time, as lecturers and students grow accustomed to this method of evaluation, and as an optimal process of online evaluations is developed leading to increased response rates, more lecturers would prefer to have their modules be evaluated electronically.

7.2.2.2 Interacting with students in the module evaluation process

Both lecturers and students are primary stakeholders in the module evaluation process. The students are the ones that give the feedback, but lecturers are the ones that have to decide what to do with the feedback. During the module evaluation process there are several opportunities for lecturers to engage with students that can possibly enrich the experience for students as well as for themselves. Before the institutional pilot, and even during the institutional pilot, there were no formal requirements for lecturers to engage with students about module evaluations, but lecturers who were interviewed were asked to reflect on whether they interacted with the students during the module evaluation process and how this was done. Interaction between students and lecturers could mainly happen at two stages: the first is in encouraging students to complete the evaluations (thus prior to students completing the evaluation) and the second is in giving feedback to students on the results of the evaluations (after students have completed evaluations). In this section, lecturers' experiences of these interactions will be discussed.

Encouraging students to complete module evaluations

Most lecturers indicated that they encouraged students to complete module evaluations. There are different ways in which this encouragement took form. In the case of electronic evaluations which

[26] Original Afrikaans text: "Die aanlyn metode maak dit baie makliker. Dit is baie minder 'admin'. Hoewel die aanlyn metode makliker is gaan jou responskoers beter wees met die hardekopie en jy kan fisies die belangrikheid daarvan verduidelik as jy die vraelyste vir hulle gee. Die ander redenasie as jy dit doen, voel die studente ook hulle moet goeie positiewe goed te gee, maar by die online voel hulle nie hulle hoef as niemand oor hulle skouer kyk nie, niemand kan sien wat hulle geskryf het nie. Hulle kan dan skryf wat hulle wil. Hulle het maar albei hulle 'pros' en 'cons'".

students had to complete in their own time, some lecturers repeatedly reminded students in class to complete evaluations. Similarly, in the case of hardcopy evaluations in class, they encouraged them to complete the forms that were handed out to them. Some lecturers also put up announcements on the learning management system (Blackboard) or on notice boards outside of their classes reminding students to complete the module evaluations.

Regardless of the methods employed to encourage students, whether verbally in class or through written announcements, the message conveyed in the attempt to encourage students to complete the evaluations could also differ among lecturers. Some lecturers only reminded students to complete the evaluations by providing logistical information, such as the link to the electronic questionnaire or the date when the electronic questionnaire would be closed. The quote below is an example of this:

> *"Well I did my best, I used the notice boards, you know, just to spread the information to let them know of the module evaluations and the link they have to go to. Yes that was that" (Lecturer 14)*

Some lecturers, however, went further in explaining to students the importance of module evaluations. They explained the value that they as lecturers place on student feedback, and how their (the students') feedback would be used, as the quotes below show:

> *"I tried to explain why it would be useful to fill it in. We didn't try and force them because then it is this negative thing but we did try to explain that it would benefit the course" (Lecturer 15)*

> *"I did encourage students by saying they had to do it and that they don't do it for me, but for the module and for those students that are going to take this module next year. Also, that they do it for us to improve"(Lecturer 17)*

Although most interviewees indicated that they encouraged students to complete evaluations, the way in which this encouragement took place was different. Lecturers who obtained high response rates (relative to response rates of other modules evaluated in their respective faculties) generally encouraged students by trying to explain the value and importance of module evaluations (also see section 6.4 of Chapter 6 for a more thorough analysis of response rates obtained). Some lecturers who obtained low response rates, however, also indicated that they encouraged students to complete the

evaluations by not only reminding them to complete it, but by highlighting the value and importance of student feedback. Despite this type of encouragement being identified in the literature as a strategy to improve response rates (see Chapter 3), this does not appear to be the only factor that influences response rates. This shows that more in-depth research on this topic is needed to better understand whether the way in which lecturers encourage students to complete evaluations has an influence on response rates.

Giving feedback to students on module evaluation results

As module evaluations usually take place at the end of a module, sometimes even the very last class, it is understandable that by the time lecturers receive the results of the evaluations it is too late for them to have a discussion about it with the students. Despite lecturers encouraging students to complete the evaluations by explaining the value and importance thereof, most students never receive feedback on the results of the evaluations that they completed, making the feedback a one-way process. In some instances, lecturers did mention that they discussed the previous year/ semester's feedback with their new classes. However, it is never the class that supplied feedback that has a discussion about it or benefits from any interventions or adaptions to the module based on that feedback.

> *"I do provide them with feedback, but normally to another group of students because I normally do module evaluation towards the end of the semester when students are about to finish with the module. I am not going to see the same group of people again in the following year in the module. There is a new group in which I will probably explain that last year the students were not happy with 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 and then this year they can also write valuable comments to help the next group. The feedback is not for the same group of students that actually filled in the questionnaire" (Lecturer 22).*

Some lecturers discarded the idea of giving feedback to students, not only because of the timing of the evaluation but because the pressure to complete all the work within a module did not leave enough time for such discussions (see quote below from Lecturer 10). There were also some lecturers who

acknowledged that they had never thought of discussing the results with students before as the quote below from Lecturer 23 shows:

> *"We have to work through this heavy book of a 1 400 pages. There is no time, not even 5 minutes, to spend on feedback to students" (Lecturer 10, translated from Afrikaans[27]).*

> *"Actually, it never occurred to me to take the information I got, that was emailed to me from the evaluation [module evaluation results] and tell them this was scored. It never crossed my mind" (Lecturer 23).*

7.2.2.3 Lecturers' use module evaluation results

Lecturers were also asked to reflect on how they themselves use module evaluation results, as well as how module evaluation results are used in their departments. Overall, module evaluation results are used by individual lecturers to see what students seem to struggle with and to make adjustments, as far as possible, accordingly. They look at the negative comments and see what can be practically addressed. Participants also indicated that sometimes, however, students are unhappy about aspects of the module that lecturers do not necessarily have control over, as the quote below suggests:

> *"Many students said that they do not communicate with me face to face, I can then take note of that. On the other hand, with my open-door policy, if a student does not communicate with me face to face there is not really something that I can do about that" (Lecturer 12, translated from Afrikaans[28]).*

In addition, lecturers found the responses to open-ended questions especially useful and focused their energy on addressing issues raised in this section of the questionnaire. One reason for this may be that lecturers do not necessarily know how to act on the quantitative results, so they merely use it to get an overall picture of how students experience the module, whereas the qualitative comments are more specific and descriptive, making it easier to act on them as the quote below shows:

> *"I must admit I kind of ignored the statistical stuff. I read the qualitative stuff, because if a student says my score is low for something I still don't know where I went wrong, but with the qualitative*

[27] Original Afrikaans text: "Ons moet deur hierdie swaar boek van 'n 1400 bladsye werk. Daar is nie tyd, nie eers 5 minute, om aan terugvoer aan studente te spandeer nie"
[28] Original Afrikaans text: "Baie studente het gesê dat hulle nie met my van aangesig tot aangesig kommunikeer het nie, dan kan ek daarop let. Aan die ander kant, met my oop-deurbeleid, as 'n student nie met my van aangesig tot aangesig kommunikeer nie, dan kan ek nie regtig iets daaromtrent doen nie".

comments they make it is much clearer. I can use their comments to improve my modules. If they say they don't think my rubric is clear enough then I try and make it clearer next year" (Lecturer 25).

Generally, it seems that although module evaluation results are used by individual lecturers, it is not always used on a departmental level. In most cases, HoDs receive the results of all lecturers in the department, but there is rarely any further action taken. There are some instances where there are discussions between the lecturer and the HoD if the said lecturer obtained poor results, or if there were serious issues raised in the module evaluations by the students. If there does not seem to be any problem, or if results are good then there is no further discussion as Lecturer 9 states:

"Why will you mess with something that looks fine?"(Lecturer 9, translated from Afrikaans[29]).

There were, however, some examples of exceptions where the module evaluation results were used during performance management discussions or even where the HoD formally discussed the results with each of the lecturers in the department. These examples were given by lecturers who have always taken part in module evaluations and where it was already ingrained in the culture of a department.

These findings are congruent with TLMs reporting (in section 7.4) that lecturers find qualitative comments more useful and that they use it to improve the module as far as it is feasible. The fact that there are no formal requirements for the use of module evaluation results, shows that not all lecturers use it in the same way. In addition, there is especially a difference among faculties as to whether HoDs use the results and how this is done. It is possibly also due to a lack of formal institutional procedure and due to lecturers not providing students with feedback of the results, that students are unsure of how, and in fact whether, lecturers use module evaluation results (see section 7.3.1.4).

7.2.2.4 Lecturers' recommendations for improving the module evaluation process

Lecturers had several recommendations for improving the module evaluation process. Many participants were in favour of evaluating modules earlier in the semester. Module evaluations cannot, however, take place so early in the semester that students would not have had a chance to properly

[29] Original Afrikaans text: "Hoekom sal jy aan iets karring wat reg lyk?"

experience all of the aspects covered in module evaluations, such as assessment. Nevertheless, earlier evaluations may have various advantages. Receiving module evaluation results while the group that provided the feedback is still busy with the module allows a lecturer to discuss it with students and to close the feedback loop by providing them with feedback on the results. It also gives lecturers the opportunity to identify major issues or concerns and, as such, to address them. The following quotes are examples of participants that recommended earlier evaluations:

> *"We will have to think carefully about when we do module evaluations and maybe do it in the middle of a module rather than the very end" (Lecturer 4, translated from Afrikaans[30]).*

> *"With an earlier evaluation one can still help or do something, like in the middle of a module, whereas at the end it is too late. After the first quarter is deep enough into the semester" (Lecturer 11, translated from Afrikaans[31]).*

> *"It is important for us to convey to the students what the results are and also it [earlier evaluations] will give you time to work on the feedback and improve what you have to improve" (Lecturer 17).*

In addition, students need to be aware of how module evaluations work and why it is important for them to complete evaluations. This relates to the encouragement of students to complete evaluations by lecturers through various methods, but it should also be a culture at the university (see quote below from Lecturer 23) and the establishment of such a culture does not rely solely on lecturers. The quote below from Lecturer 9 is an example of a suggestion to create more awareness of module evaluations among students:

> *"If they [students] do module evaluation from the first year, first semester they will know it is a normal thing, it is a part of the course" (Lecturer 23).*

> *"We can at least advertise on campus. We have a big television screen when you get into the building, I know many others also do, then we can maybe advertise on there for example that module evaluations should be completed and that students should go check their emails for details. We can*

[30] Original Afrikaans text: "Ons moet mooi dink oor wanneer ons module evaluering doen en dit miskien in die middel van 'n module doen eerder as heel aan die einde"
[31] Original Afrikaans text: "Met 'n vroeër evaluaering kan 'n mens nog help of iets doen, waar dit te laat is aan die einde. Na die eerste kwartaal is diep genoeg in die semester in"

also make use of the campus radio station to advertise the module evaluations" (Lecturer 9, translated from Afrikaans32).

A combination of all of these recommendations may go a long way in not only improving response rates, but also gaining optimal value from the process for all stakeholders involved. Providing students with feedback, which was also a recommendation students made (see section 7.3), is an aspect that needs serious consideration in improving the entire process of module evaluations. Another recommendation that lecturers, as well as students made was making module evaluations compulsory.

7.2.2.5 Module evaluations as a double edged sword

Many of the lecturers that were interviewed started the interview by talking about module evaluations and then at a later point in the interview started referring to 'lecturer evaluations'. This was something they did almost instinctively, as if module evaluations and lecturer evaluations are the same thing. In addition to the term 'lecturer evaluation' some lecturers also made defensive statements, explaining that lecturers do not have control over all of the aspects measured on the questionnaire. For example, a lecturer may create an environment that encourages class participation, but it is ultimately up to a student to participate in class discussions. Some lecturers acknowledged that module evaluations make them feel vulnerable or exposed, as the quotes below from Lecturer 25 and Lecturer 3 illustrate.

"I think you may get many comments like the one I am about to make. We do feel a bit vulnerable because I can count on one hand the number of students that really tried hard. Not necessarily well, but even when they're weak they are committed. It is a disconcerting feeling to know that many students are evaluating us who don't come to class, who backchat, who argue with you because you dared to give them zero for plagiarism. It is not a nice thing but I mean, what can one do?" (Lecturer 25).

"It [module evaluation results] can be used against you when you are up for a promotion. Then they want to look at these results and the results are based on the most recent feedback from students. Then it is only those 12 [students] that were irritated with you and that wanted to get back at you

[32] Original Afrikaans text: "Ons kan ten minste op kampus adverteer. Ons het 'n groot televisieskerm as jy by die gebou in kom, ek weet baie ander het ook, dan kan mens miskien daarop adverteer byvoorbeeld dat module evaluering moet voltooi word en dat studente na hulle e-posse moet gaan vir besonderhede. Ons kan ook van die kampus radiostasie gebruik maak om die module evaluerings te adverteer"

> *because you did not answer their question quickly enough or you did not give a scope, you know, all those things. It can come back and have a negative influence on your career. So people think it [module evaluations] is about feedback and institutional evaluation, but we are dealing with people's careers here". (Lecturer 3, translated from Afrikaans[33]).*

Furthermore, some participants disputed the accuracy of the results of the evaluations because of certain fundamental concerns they have about module evaluations. Some lecturers are of the opinion that students do not read the questions properly because they are over-surveyed (as they are expected to complete evaluations for many of their modules) and that students will give undeserved poor ratings to lecturers just because they do not like them for instance. The quotes below are examples of the distrust that certain lecturers have in module evaluations:

> *"They [students] will interpret it [module evaluations] to be a kind of punitive measure that they can impose on you as a lecturer. Yes, you are always after them now they will say everything negative about you but without reflecting on what is actually the truth". (Lecturer 19).*

> *"What I have noticed is that students only complete the evaluations just for the sake of completing them. I do not see that they think about the questions. It is like they consider it as just another form they have to complete" (Lecturer 8, translated from Afrikaans[34]).*

The quotes above illustrate more than just a distrust of module evaluations, they indicate to an extent, how lecturers perceive their students. It shows that some lecturers do not believe that students take module evaluations seriously and that they do not believe that students give their honest opinions in these evaluations. The question must be raised as to how these perceptions of distrust affect the quality of teaching and learning.

On the other hand, there were also lecturers who had positive attitudes toward module evaluation and who wanted their modules to be evaluated. The value that student feedback adds to their teaching and learning and the belief that students are capable of evaluating a module contributes to being positive about module evaluations. Some lecturers reported that the type of feedback that students provide on a

[33] Original Afrikaans text: "Dit kan teen jou gebruik word as'n bevordering ter sprake kom. Dan sê hulle okay maar kom ons gaan kyk net na hierdie resultate en dan word resultate gebaseer op die die mees onlangse terugvoer van studente en dan is dit net daai 12 wat geïrriteerd was met jou om jou te probeer terug kry vir omdat jy nie hulle vraag vinnig genoeg geantwoord het nie of jy het nie vir hulle 'n scope gegee nie. En dan kan dit terugkom om jou loopbaan negatief te beïnvloed. So mense dink net dit gaan oor terugvoering en institusionele evaluering maar dit gaan oor individue se loopbane hierso".

[34] "Wat ek agter gekom het is dat studente net die evaluasies voltooi om dit te voltooi. Ek sien nie dat hulle oor die vrae dink nie. Dit is asof hulle dit net beskou as net nog 'n vorm wat hulle moet voltooi".

module evaluation questionnaire helps them to understand how students perceive the module, to identify what they struggle with in the module, and how they perceive certain aspects of the lecturer's teaching. This information adds value to students' teaching and learning. These lecturers also believe that students are capable, and possibly in the best position, to evaluate the module. This is not to say that none of the lecturers in this group have any issues with module evaluations or the process, but they were generally positive about module evaluations as the quotes below show:

> *"The diner, not the cook judges the meal" (Lecturer 13).*

> *"I believe that good teaching is open to change and there could be change if there is feedback and the most important feedback should come from the students as the people who are involved in the learning process" (Lecturer 18).*

The quotes above are examples of how some lecturers value student feedback and do incorporate this feedback in their modules. It is also indicative of how these lecturers perceive their students and their positions as lecturers in relation to their students in the teaching and learning process.

The divergent views of lecturers on module evaluations, student feedback, and students are evident from the findings in the preceding sections. While most lectures were more positive about the institutional module evaluation process compared to the previous system of module evaluations there are still lecturers with fundamental questions about module evaluations and there are several recommendations which can enrich and improve the entire process. While some lecturers are distrustful of students there are lecturers who value feedback from students and who believe that students are not only in a position to evaluate modules, but are possibly in the best position to do so. The following sections of this chapter explore student experiences of module evaluations and the similarities and differences in their experience compared to lecturers' experience.

7.3 Students

Data was collected from students in the first and second phase of the research (see **Figure 7.3**). Student focus groups were conducted in phase 1 to better understand students' experiences of module evaluations and to test if the items on the institutional module evaluation questionnaire were understandable to students. Students were interviewed in the second phase of the research to test their understanding of items of the questionnaire that were flagged as problematic during the focus groups.

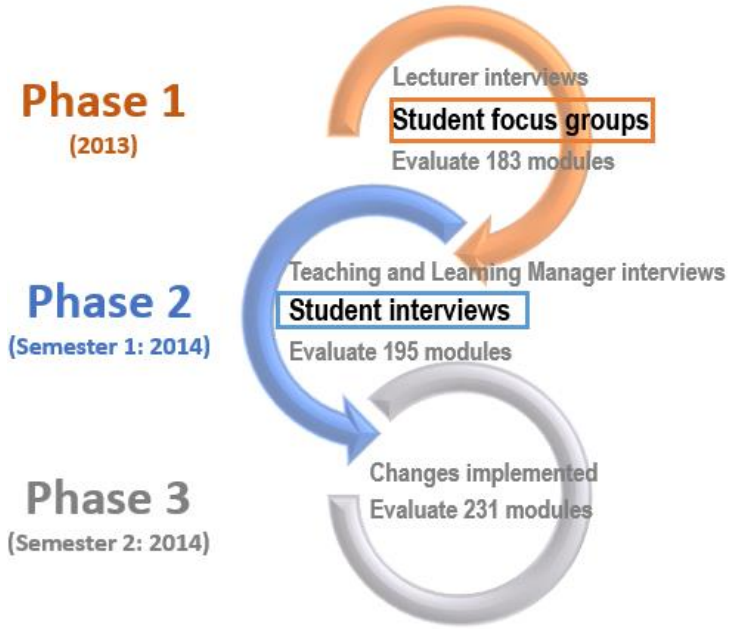


Figure 7.3: Illustration of the phases of data collection, highlighting the phases where data was collected from students.

Table 7.3 shows the demographic profile of students who participated in the student focus groups. The demographic profile shows that the sample was diverse and included male and female students from different faculties, different year groups, and different racial groups receiving instruction in both English and Afrikaans.

Table 7.3: Demographic profile of student focus groups

	N	%
Gender		
Females	36	60%
Males	24	40%
Race		
Black	40	67%
White	14	23%
Other	6	10%
Language		
Afrikaans	11	18%
English	49	82%
Year group		
First year	10	17%
Second year	10	17%
Third year	14	23%
Fourth year	22	37%
Fifth year	4	7%
Faculty		
Economic and Management Sciences	5	8%
Education	12	20%
Humanities	25	42%
Law	8	13%
Natural and Agricultural Sciences	8	13%
Theology	2	3%

A total of 60 students from the Bloemfontein and Qwaqwa campus participated in the focus groups that were conducted in phase 1 of the research. Among them were students from all six faculties that participated in the institutional module evaluation pilot, as well as students from different year groups. Although useful data was gathered on student experiences of module evaluations, the data gathered on students' understanding of items on the questionnaire was insufficient for any substantial conclusions to be drawn. It was, however, possible to identify a number of items which should be investigated in more depth. Hence, in phase 2 of the research students were interviewed on a one-on-one basis with a specific focus on the items that were pointed out as especially problematic from the data gathered in the first phase. A total of 16 students on the Bloemfontein and Qwaqwa campuses were interviewed, again including students from the six faculties participating in the pilot and students from different year groups. A more detailed overview of the methodology of the research is presented in Chapter 5. In this section findings from student focus groups and interviews will be presented.

7.3.1 Students' overall experience of module evaluations

Student experiences of module evaluations can be grouped in similar broad themes to lecturer experiences, as the first part of the focus group was structured in such a way that data collected could be analysed together with lecturer data (see Appendix H.). This allowed for triangulation of findings as well as reflection on the extent to which students and lecturers had similar or different views about module evaluations. The broad themes, which will be discussed in more detail in the following sections of this chapter, are presented in **Table 7.4**.

Table 7.4: Emergent themes in student focus groups

Theme	Sub-theme
Students overall experience of module evaluations	Reading items carefully
	Completing module evaluations
	Feedback on results of module evaluations
	Students' perception of how module evaluation results are used
	Students' preferred module evaluation method
	Students' recommendations for improving the module evaluation process

All of the students who participated in the focus groups had completed module evaluations in the past. They had generally not completed module evaluations for all the modules that they were enrolled for, but had completed the evaluations in some (in most cases, more than one) of their modules. Students reported that they predominantly completed the evaluations at the end of the semester, mostly in the last class before end-of-semester examinations. This is congruent with what lecturers reported – that module evaluations were not compulsory in all faculties/departments and that modules were usually evaluated at the end of the module.

7.3.1.1 Reading items carefully

Concerns were raised among lecturers about students not taking module evaluations seriously. In an attempt to investigate this, students were asked how carefully they read the items on the questionnaire before answering them. Although some students conceded that they did not read all the questions

carefully, for reasons which are explained below, other students indicated that they did take evaluations seriously and that they read questions carefully.

Among those that did not read the items carefully one of the most frequently stated reasons was that students did not consider module evaluations to be important and did not feel their views were taken seriously. This also relates to why they sometimes did not complete the evaluations when given an opportunity to do so. Quotes from students in focus groups 5 and 6 are evident of this:

> *"We don't feel like these lecturers make it that serious for us. They don't really emphasise that you really need to take your time" (Participant from Focus Group 5).*

> *"I think most of the lecturers don't actually tell us the importance of filling in the evaluation forms, so we just take it as a game, like it is a formality" (Participant from Focus Group 6).*

Students also noted that they do not believe that their input is taken into consideration. Some students indicated that they used to read the items carefully in order to give meaningful feedback but as they progressed with their studies without seeing their feedback addressed in their modules, they stopped taking the evaluations seriously. The quote below illustrates this:

> *"I'd say after a while, maybe two years, you don't read because they[35] stay the same, they don't change" (Participant from Focus Group 2).*

Another reason for not reading items carefully is that students do not always have time to complete the evaluations between classes. Evaluation forms are usually handed out at the end of the class, just before students have to go to another class. Therefore this leaves them with little time to read all the items carefully.

> *"There is not enough time. The first five [items] you may still read carefully, but after that you just answer quickly" (Participant in Focus Group 4, translated from Afrikaans[36]).*

> *"Sometimes they [survey administrators] come in and we're left with 5 minutes in the class and we have another class afterward so you're just going to tick it" (Participant from Focus Group 5).*

[35] Unclear as to what 'they' refer to. It could refer to lecturers or modules.
[36] Original Afrikaans text: "Daar is nie genoeg tyd nie. Die eerste vyf sal jy dalk nog versigtig lees, maar daarna antwoord jy net vinnig".

Several (but not all) students noted that their perception of a lecturer influences how seriously they take the evaluation. In some cases if the student likes the lecturer they may either read the items more carefully and thus take the entire evaluation more seriously, or just give high ratings without reading the questions. Alternatively, if the student dislikes the lecturer they may just give low ratings without reading the items carefully. It should be highlighted that students did not explain why they may like or dislike a lecturer, and lecturer popularity does not necessarily correlate positively with how effective or 'good' a lecturer is.

> *"The last one [module evaluation questionnaire] I filled in, it was online, I actually read all the questions very carefully, but I think it is because I actually like the lecturer" (Participant in Focus Group 2).*

> *"If I don't really like the module or the lecturer, I'll colour in the lower ratings, like the ones and twos, but if I like the lecturer I'll really make an effort to do the evaluation" (Participant in Focus Group 3).*

> *"Sometimes you just look at the lecturer and you say 'hey, disagree, disagree, and disagree'" (Participant from Focus Group 5).*

It is important to reiterate that not all students read the items carelessly. There were students in each of the focus groups that indicated that they read the items carefully, that they answer the questions honestly and that they take the evaluations seriously. It does not necessarily mean that students do not take evaluations seriously if they do not read the items carefully. They sometimes do not read the items carefully because they do not have time in class, for instance. Nonetheless, it is important to carefully reflect on students' reasons for not engaging with the evaluation questions.

7.3.1.2 Completing module evaluations

While the majority of students report that they usually complete module evaluation questionnaires, a significant minority do not. These students raised some important points. As it is not compulsory for students to complete module evaluations, some do not always make use of the opportunity to

complete the evaluations despite being aware of the online evaluations or despite being in class when evaluations are handed out.

One of the main reasons adduced by students for not completing evaluations is that it is unclear what the purpose of the evaluations is and how exactly they are used.

> *"I just didn't find it important. It was just a sheet with questions. I just looked at the questions and thought 'nah, who cares?'" (Participant in Focus Group 1).*

> *"I think mostly, no offense, but it is just a waste of time" (Participant in Focus Group 3).*

Some students indicated that nothing changes in the module despite the feedback that they give and hence they do not complete them. This has led them to believe that module evaluation results are not necessarily being considered when decisions about the module are made, as the quotes below show:

> *"You just waste your time completing it because nothing ever changes in any case" (Participant in Focus Group 3).*

> *"I don't think they [lecturers] take it seriously because it's the same lecturer over and over and they do the same things over and over. If you ask your seniors about the module it's the same thing that you hear over and over". (Participant in Focus Group 1).*

In addition, because there are module evaluations for more than one module, students experience survey fatigue. They find the process of completing multiple surveys irritating and time-consuming. Some students also indicated that the questionnaire is too long and that they therefore do not complete the entire questionnaire or sometimes decide not to complete it.

> *"It is irritating, you just want to go out of class" (Participant in Focus Group 2).*

> *"And then you go to other classes and you fill in the same thing again" (Participant in Focus Group 5).*

While some lecturers reported that students do not take module evaluations seriously (see section 7.2), some students, in turn, reported that they do not feel that their feedback is valued or that their voices are heard. This is an indication of how lecturers and students perceive each other which affects the

teaching and learning relationship between lecturers and students and also affects the module evaluation process. With this knowledge, further more targeted investigations into the relationship between lecturers and students are needed to identify misunderstandings and point out discrepancies between how lecturers and students perceive each other. It is important for the institution to not only be aware of the relationship between its lecturers and students, but to act upon it in such a way as to improve the quality of teaching and learning at the university.

7.3.1.3 Feedback on results of module evaluations

As was described in section 7.2.2.2 both students and lecturers are stakeholders in the module evaluation process. Students provide feedback and lecturers use the feedback as they see fit. The two main opportunities lecturers have to interact with students throughout the process is at the beginning when they can encourage them to complete the evaluations and at the end when they can provide feedback on the results of module evaluations to students. This shows students that their feedback is valued and considered and can possibly encourage students to complete module evaluations in the future.

The large majority of students who participated in the focus groups indicated that they never receive feedback on module evaluation results. There were only two students (among the 60 students who participated in 6 focus groups) who reported that they *know of* instances where a class received feedback on module evaluation results of the group of students who previously took the class (they themselves were not enrolled in a class that received feedback however). Students not receiving feedback is congruent with findings of the previous section where students reported that they do not always complete module evaluations because they do not know what the purpose of module evaluations is and they do not see any changes take effect based on their feedback. The quote below encapsulates the experience of the majority of students who participated in the focus groups:

> *"Never, never in the past four years did one lecturer come and say 'Listen, we did a survey now and this is what was found'. You also never see any change" (Participant in Focus Group 1).*

This is mainly because, as was found in the lecturer interviews (see section 7.2) and student focus groups, module evaluations take place late in the semester/year which does not leave enough time for lecturers to give feedback on the results. In addition, as was reported in section 7.2, lecturers themselves did not always receive module evaluation results. The advantages of closing the feedback loop, as well as the value that receiving feedback can add to students' overall experience of module evaluations should be considered when decisions are made on when modules should be evaluated.

7.3.1.4 Students' perception of how module evaluations are used

Students had several ideas about how module evaluation results are used. Some of them thought that the results are used to improve the quality of the module. These students were of the opinion that lecturers take student feedback into consideration when they prepare for the module and even in setting up tests or other assessments.

> *"I think it is mostly used for improvement and quality assurance" (Participant in Focus Group 2).*

> *"To improve the modules and to make them more student-friendly" (Participant in Focus Group 4, translated from Afrikaans[37]).*

However, many students were unsure if module evaluation results were used at all. As was described in the previous sections of this chapter students do not experience any changes based on their feedback and they also do not receive any feedback on the results of the evaluations. Therefore, it makes sense that some students believe that the results are not used. When asked how they thought module evaluations were used, participants in two of the six focus groups remarked that the results probably ended up in the rubbish bin. This was a statement with which several other participants in the particular focus groups agreed with. The quotes below are also indicative of the sense that some students have that module evaluation results may not be used at all:

> *"Some lecturers probably read the evaluations and do nothing about them. They probably only read a few though, not all the evaluations" (Participant in Focus Group 6).*

[37] Original Afrikaans text: "Om die modules te verbeter en meer studente-vriendelik te maak".

> *"I do not think they do much with them [module evaluations] because we find that we state our problems with the lecturer and the same lecturer comes back next year with the same problems" (Participant in Focus Group 5).*

> *"What do lecturers do with it? I think somebody else sees it, like the secretary or somebody. I don't think it ever reaches the lecturer" (Participant in Focus Group 4, translated from Afrikaans[38]).*

A few students also offered other possibilities for which module evaluation results might be used. These include using the results for research, to better understand students in the faculty, and for lecturer promotions. None of the students were very confident about how module evaluations are used, including the students that thought that it was used to improve the quality of the module and those that believed that it may not be used at all. They merely guessed how module evaluations are used. This was clear from the way in which they answered these questions, often answering them with a question, as if asking if they were correct. The uncertainty around how module evaluations are used is possibly due to the lack of guidelines governing the use of module evaluations at the UFS. Students are also likely to be unsure of how the evaluations are used, if at all, because they never receive feedback on the results of the evaluations.

7.3.1.5 Students' preferred module evaluation method

There is a slight preference towards hardcopy evaluations among students who participated in the focus groups. One of the most frequently mentioned reasons for this, is that students get an opportunity in class to complete the evaluations and that they are not expected to complete them in their free time, as is the case with most online evaluations. It is thus more convenient for them to complete the hardcopy evaluations than it is to complete online evaluations.

> *"Most of the time I'm online, I'm doing my own things. A survey or a questionnaire is the last thing I'm going to be doing" (Participant in Focus Group 1).*

[38] Original Afrikaans text: "Wat doen die dosente met dit? Ek dink iemand anders sien dit, soos die sekretaresse of iemand. Ek dink nie dit kom ooit by die dosent uit nie".

> *"Every time you go on the internet it is either for information or Facebook or Twitter or something else that benefits us. When you see such things [module evaluation survey link] on Blackboard you will ignore it" (Participant in Focus Group 5).*

Several students also mentioned that they were not always comfortable navigating an electronic environment. These students preferred the hardcopy method because it took them less time to complete a paper-based survey than it would to complete the evaluation online.

> *"Some of us might be a little ignorant when it comes to computers and stuff. We only go there when we are forced to do an assignment" (Participant in Focus Group 6).*

> *"I think that it is a misperception of young people that we are all on the internet constantly" (Participant in Focus Group 4, translated from Afrikaans[39]).*

Many students, however, do prefer online evaluations. For these students it is more convenient to complete online evaluations because they are comfortable with the electronic platform on which online evaluations are completed and they spend a lot of time on their computers already. They are also conscious of the effects which using paper in a wasteful manner has on the environment. Furthermore, students feel less rushed when completing the evaluations in their own time and they feel they can answer the questions honestly without having to worry about being in time for their next class.

> *"I feel more at ease when I do the online evaluation. I have time to complete it, where in class I just want to leave" (Participant in Focus Group 2).*

Currently, the most frequently used online option requires students to complete evaluations in their own time, albeit in the computer laboratory on campus or on their personal computers at home. There are some instances where a computer laboratory is booked in advance and students gain an opportunity to complete evaluations on computers, as would be the case with paper-based evaluations. This option is, however, dependent on many factors such as class size, the preference of the lecturer and availability of laboratory spaces.

[39]Original Afrikaans text: " Ek dink dat dit 'n wanpersepsie is van jongmense dat ons almal die heeltyd op die internet is"

Some students who indicated that they prefer hardcopy evaluations mentioned that they would prefer online evaluations if the evaluations took place during class time. There was also a slight preference towards hardcopy evaluations among lecturers (see section 7.2.2.1). Incidentally, the main reason given for this preference was that response rates are lower with the online method because students do not complete evaluations if they are required to do so in their free time. This is something that should be investigated in more depth, as there are also students who, as was described in this section, feel rushed when expected to complete evaluations in class and who prefer the online method precisely because they have more time to complete them in their own time.

7.3.1.6 Students' recommendations for improving the module evaluation process

One of the key recommendations from students to improve the module evaluation process was that they should receive feedback on the results. By receiving feedback they would know that their input was considered and that their opinions were heard. Feedback does not necessarily always have to be an action that arises from their input. It may just be a discussion between the lecturer and the class to create a space for dialogue between lecturers and students about various aspects of the module.

> *"If somebody comments on an issue, at least come back to the class and explain what the problem is and that you're aware of it" (Participant in Focus Group 4, translated from Afrikaans[40]).*

> *"It is advisable that lecturers go through the questionnaire or the survey with students. Maybe 10 minutes of the session and then give feedback to students. That is the most key thing" (Participant in Focus Group 5).*

Various other recommendations were made by students to improve the process. They contributed enthusiastically to this part of the focus group discussion and were generally positive about being able to contribute to the possible improvement of the process. This shows that students value playing an active role in their learning process. It is also an important finding and something that the institution could build on in its endeavours to improve the module evaluation process.

[40] Original Afrikaans text: "As iemand kommentaar lewer oor 'n kwessie, kom ten minste terug na die klas en verduidelik wat die probleem is en dat jy daarvan bewus is".

Some of the other suggestions include that the questionnaire should be shortened. Some students would be more willing to complete evaluations and read the items carefully if the questionnaire were shorter as a Participant in focus group 1 mentioned: "Why is it so long? I got bored filling it in".

In two of the six focus groups, students proposed that modules are evaluated twice a semester where improvement can be measured between the first and second evaluation. This suggestion was embraced by the majority of the participants in these focus groups. While the potential value of two evaluations is recognised, given time restraints, survey fatigue and logistical issues, it is unlikely that an additional evaluation would be successful.

Another suggestion students made was to evaluate modules earlier, to allow time to provide students with feedback. This suggestion is congruent with the recommendations some lecturers made.

> *"I see no necessity to fill in the form at the end of the semester" (Participant in Focus Group 6).*

Interestingly, and somewhat unexpectedly, a number of students also recommended that module evaluations should be compulsory. It was not part of the original line of questioning of the focus groups to raise the issue of making module evaluations compulsory. The issue was, however, brought up by students themselves in the first focus group and since they felt so strongly about it, it was raised in subsequent focus groups as to whether module evaluations should be compulsory. In all of the focus groups, there were some students who supported the notion of compulsory module evaluations, or at the very least did not oppose it. These students felt that it would add to the importance of the evaluations and that by making it compulsory more students would complete it. Some of those in support also mentioned that if the evaluations were compulsory, lecturers would probably also take it more seriously and be required to use the results.

> *"Making it compulsory is a good idea, then lecturers will probably also look at the evaluations and then maybe we will get better study guides" (Participant in Focus Group 4, translated from Afrikaans[41]).*

[41] Original Afrikaans text: "Om dit verpligtend te maak is 'n goeie idee dan sal dosente seker ook na die evaluasies kyk en dan kan ons dalk beter studiegidse kry".

"If it [module evaluations] is linked to academic record it would be taken more seriously. It should be something that is compulsory" (Participant in Focus Group 1).

While compulsory module evaluations may increase response rates, which is the main concern among lecturers regarding the institutional module evaluation process, it does not guarantee that students will carefully read all the items. More students completing module evaluations also does not guarantee the validity of results if students do not understand the items. Therefore, it was important to test if the items on the institutional instrument was easily understandable. Consequently, an item analysis was conducted to determine how well students understand the items on the institutional module evaluation questionnaire.

7.3.2 Item analysis

The second section of the student focus groups was to determine how understandable the items on the proposed institutional questionnaire are. Students were asked to write down the meaning of each of the items on the questionnaire in their own words. This part of the focus group did, however, not produce a level of detail and quality of data that could be used on its own. It seemed as if students did not always understand the instructions and many students only rewrote the item by changing the sentence construction. Others answered the questions as if they were completing the module evaluation. From the data gathered it was, however, possible to identify six items that appeared to be particularly problematic (see **Table 7.5** below), and so needed to be investigated in more depth.

Table 7.5: Items included in student interviews

Item Nr	Item text	Scales
3.2.	The content taught in the module related to the learning outcomes.	Strongly disagree, disagree, agree, strongly agree.
4.1.	The module content prepared me for the assessment (assignments, tests, examinations).	Strongly disagree, disagree, agree, strongly agree.
5.3	Rate your lecturer's language skills.	Very poor, poor, average, good, excellent.
5.8.	The lecturer expects students to do their best.	Strongly disagree, disagree, agree, strongly agree.
6.1	The class/ module atmosphere helped me to learn.	Strongly disagree, disagree, agree, strongly agree.
6.2.	The lecturer treats all students fairly.	Strongly disagree, disagree, agree, strongly agree.

In order to investigate these items in more depth, during phase 2 students were interviewed on a one-on-one basis, asking them to explain each of these items in their own words. The findings of these interviews are presented, item by item, in the sections below. **Table 7.6** provide an overview of the demographic profile of students who were interviewed in the second phase of the study.

Table 7.6: Demographic profile of interviewed students

	N	%
Gender		
Females	6	37.5%
Males	10	62.5%
Race		
Black	10	62.5%
White	6	37.5%
Language		
Afrikaans	4	25%
English	12	75%
Year group		
First year	3	19%
Second year	2	13%
Third year	7	44%
Fourth year	4	25%
Faculty		
Economic and Management Sciences	3	19%
Education	3	19%
Humanities	3	19%
Law	1	6%
Natural and Agricultural Sciences	5	31%
Theology	1	6%

Item 3.2: The content taught in the module related to the learning outcomes

Generally students could explain the word ‘content’ in the item well. They explained it as what should be learned in a module, sometimes giving examples such as the text book, chapters, or units. The quotes below are examples of how two students explained the word ‘content’:

> *“The learning things that are inside the text books or whatever is being taught, for example the units or the chapters”. (Student 4)*

> *"I think it is like the sources and stuff which were covered in class and which you will have to study for the exams. It is also the PowerPoint slides which the lecturer used" (Student 7, translated from Afrikaans[42]).*

Although they seemed to have a firm grasp on the meaning of the word 'content' in the item, students could not clearly explain the phrase 'related to the learning outcomes'. Some students did not know what 'learning outcomes' referred to, while others could not explain how content could be *related* to learning outcomes. The quotation below is an example of a response which indicated that the student did not understand the meaning of this item:

> *"Usually they give us a module guide there are timeframes to say a certain chapter must be done so the content is what we do in class must correspond with that timeframe" (Student 11).*

Item 4.1: The module content prepared me for the assessment (assignments, tests, examinations)

After the first phase of the research a change was already made to this item. The word 'assessment' was explained by giving three examples of different types of assessment in brackets 'assignments, tests, examinations'. It was thus not necessary for students to explain what they understood the word 'assessment' to mean in this context.

Students could explain what it entailed to be 'prepared' for an assessment and could give clear examples of situations in which they would feel that they were prepared or unprepared for assessments.

> *"When I can look at the study outcomes and fully be able to understand them" (Student 8).*

> *"How you actually do know that you're prepared is when you see how well you can explain something to yourself or somebody else" (Student 16).*

Interviewed students did, however, experience difficulty in explaining how *content* prepares them for assessment. As was discussed above, they seemed to understand what 'content' meant but in this instance, they could not explain how exactly content could prepare a person for assessment.

[42] Original Afrikaans text: "Ek dink dit is die bronne en goed wat behandel is in klas en waaroor jy sal moet leer vir die eksamens. Dit is ook die PowerPoint 'slides' wat die dosent gebruik het".

Item 5.2: Rate your lecturer's language skills

There was a clear distinction between how Afrikaans language of instruction students understood this question and how English language of instruction students understood this question. Among English students, there seemed to be a notion that a lecturer with good language skills is one who can explain concepts so that everyone in class understands it. Typically, a lecturer who uses simple language and who is mindful of the students in class who are not mother tongue English speakers. English students will therefore typically rate a lecturer as having good or excellent language skills if he or she can effectively convey a message in such a way that the majority of the class will understand it without difficulty. These students are not concerned with grammar and pronunciation as much as they are concerned with how clear the message is.

> *"I think it is being able to use language that will accommodate all students since we are from different cultures and we are speaking different languages. It is someone who is able to accommodate everyone in the class" (Student 14).*

> *"I've got a lecturer that uses big words, I don't know if that is language skills. Then there are lecturers that just use plain English that everyone can understand. I've learned some new words from the one who uses big words, which is nice, but that other lecturer that speaks in a way we can all understand I would say has good language skills. To me that is good language skills" (Student 2).*

Afrikaans students, on the other hand, were more critical of grammar, sentence construction and correct pronunciation as indicators of good language skills. They were less concerned with the content of the message being conveyed and considered the *way* in which the message was conveyed as language skills.

> *"I have a lecturer that pronounces 'technology' incorrectly as 'tegnoloogie'. It bothers me. If you speak Afrikaans you must pronounce the words correctly and your sentence construction must be correct as well" (Student 7, translated from Afrikaans[43]).*

This difference might be explained by the fact that Afrikaans language of instruction students tend to be mother tongue speakers of the language and so might be more sensitive to language correctness.

[43] Original Afrikaans text: "Ek het 'n dosent wat 'tegnologie' verkeerdelik as 'tegnoloogie' uitspreek. Dit pla my. As jy Afrikaans praat moet jy die woorde reg uitspreek en jou sinskonstruksie moet ook reg wees".

Another explanation might be that Afrikaans classes are less diverse, so students are less conscious of the need to make language accessible.

Item 5.8: The lecturer expects students to do their best

Most of the students who were interviewed explained 'their best' to be a relative concept which can mean different things for different people. One student's best may not be another student's best.

> *"It is their maximum potential. Some will be able to reach 100% others fifties and so on" (Student 4).*

> *"All that the lecturer actually expects is that each and every individual, because we are gifted differently, give in work to the best of their abilities. Lecturers can then not expect one student that gets 80% every time to be the same as one who gets 60% because it is the best of both of their abilities" (Student 16).*

Students had several ideas about how lecturers who typically expect their students to do their best behave. Mostly these lecturers will engage with students on a personal level, or will make an effort to get to know their students. They will motivate and care for students and will give regular and timeous feedback on submitted work. Furthermore, they will challenge students and make an effort to test and improve the level of performance of their students. These lecturers will not, for example, just use question papers from previous years. The quotation below is an example of a response explaining how lecturers who typically expect their students to do their best behave:

> *"Well, they would make us write tests that are not too easy and if you got a particular question wrong the lecturer will come to you and give you a script and show you what you got wrong here and explain to you why you got it wrong. She would want to determine if it was because you didn't understand or didn't study" (Student 14).*

Item 6.1: The class or module atmosphere (vibe) helped me to learn

This item also underwent revision after the first phase of the research. The word 'vibe' was put in brackets to explain what was meant by the word 'atmosphere'. Despite this, several students still did

not explain ‘atmosphere’ in this context correctly, often referring to it as the physical environment in class, as the quote below from Student 11 illustrates:

> *“The atmosphere in the class. I’ll make an example in my English class it was really hot and it was difficult to concentrate” (Student 11).*

Regardless of how they understood the term ‘atmosphere’, many students experienced difficulty in trying to explain how atmosphere could help, or for that matter hinder, learning. They were asked to give examples of situations where the atmosphere in the module helped or hindered their learning to determine whether they understood the question as a whole, and very few students could give clear and sensible explanations. For example:

> *“When we have the group assignment or task some learners fail to attend the group meetings so it lacks the good atmosphere in a class” (Student 12).*

Item 6.2: The lecturer treats all students fairly

The majority of students who were interviewed considered their lecturers to be fair and found it difficult to think of a, albeit hypothetical, situation in which a lecturer would be described as unfair. Those that were able to give examples of how an unfair lecturer would behave mostly referred to being unfair in assessment. For instance, when a lecturer gave marks on an inconsistent basis and or set up assessment that tested knowledge which had not yet been acquired.

Participants mostly defined fair as ‘treating everyone the same’ and also in some instances as being mindful and accommodating uniqueness and differences among students. They also mentioned that ‘fair’ in marking of assessment refers to marks both relative to the marks of other students, but also in marking an individual’s work fairly. The quote below is an example of a response explaining how a fair lecturer behaves:

"He does not have favourites. He treats everyone the same. If he is friendly with one student, he is friendly with all students. He also gives everyone the same tips for the exams" (Student 1, translated from Afrikaans[44]).

7.3.2.1 Revisions made to the institutional module evaluation instrument

In addition to student interviews, reliability and factor analyses were performed by DIRAP staff to establish shared correlations and variances and to test whether any items could be excluded to shorten the questionnaire. The module evaluation instrument was also compared with the CLASSE which is administered across all faculties at the UFS, to identify similarities between the two instruments in order to subsequently identify items for omission (Kriel, 2014).

Based on the interview findings, statistical analyses and comparison of the CLASSE and the module evaluation instrument, the following was proposed by the research team consisting of the principal researcher of this study (who conducted and analysed the interviews), two researchers at DIRAP (who performed factor analysis and compared the CLASSE and the module evaluation instrument) and the module evaluation coordinator at DIRAP:

- Omit item 3.2 (The content related to the learning outcomes)
- Omit item 4.1 (The module content prepared me for the assessment)
- Replace item 5.3 (Rate your lecturer's language skills) with: "Rate your lecturer's communication skills"
- Although the interviews did not indicate a misunderstanding on the part of the students in the explanation of item 5.8 (The lecturer expects students to do their best) nor was it flagged in the statistical analyses. The subjective nature of the concepts, broad range of interpretations of the meaning of the phrase 'their best', and the pressure to shorten the instrument led the team to decide to omit this item.
- Omit item 6.1 (The class/ module atmosphere helped me to learn).
- Keep item 6.2 (The lecturer treats all students fairly)

[44] Original Afrikaans text: "Hy het nie gunstelinge nie. Hy behandel almal dieselfde. As hy vriendelik is met een student is hy vriendelik met al die studente. Hy gee ook vir almal dieselfde 'tips' vir die eksamens".

The further revised questionnaire will be used in the first semester 2015 module evaluations (May – June 2015) if TLMs agree to it after consulting with the lecturers in their faculties[45]. The need for a shorter questionnaire was expressed by lecturers, students and TLMs, and will go a long way in reducing printing costs which in turn could allow more faculties to make use of the hardcopy method, so improving response rates.

In this section students' experiences of module evaluations were presented. Students' main concern with module evaluations was that they were not always sure how their feedback was used or whether it was used at all. They never received feedback on the results of module evaluations which contributed to this uncertainty. A key recommendation from students, therefore, was that they should receive feedback on the results of module evaluations. Moreover, the majority of students preferred paper-based evaluations, because they did not have to complete these in their free time as was generally the case with online evaluations. In the second part of this section, students' understanding of the module evaluation items were explored followed by the adaptations made to the instrument based on student input.

In the next section of this chapter, the experiences of the third and final primary stakeholder group, namely the TLMs will be explored. An overview of the module evaluation process followed across the institution will first be provided, after which the positive aspects and concerns, as highlighted by the TLMs, with the institutional module evaluation pilot will be presented.

7.4 Teaching and Learning Managers

Each faculty at the UFS has a TLM responsible for the promotion of good teaching and learning practices within the faculty and to support lecturers with teaching and learning related matters. The facilitation of the module evaluation on a faculty-level, as well as the use of module evaluation results on a faculty-level is the responsibility of the TLM. They are thus, along with lecturers and students, crucial role-players in the module evaluation process.

[45] The institutional module evaluation process continues even though this research project only focuses on 3 phases over a 2 year period.

The TLM in each faculty who participated in the module evaluation pilot[46]was interviewed to better understand how the process of evaluating modules works and to understand how module evaluations are used in their faculty. Although one of the goals of institutional module evaluations was to streamline the process and to develop an institutional process, faculties still had a degree of freedom in certain aspects of both the process and use of module evaluations. It was therefore important to understand how these aspects worked in each faculty. The interviews with TLMs took place in the second phase of the research (see Figure 7.4).

Figure 7.4: Illustration of the phases of data collection, highlighting where data was collected from Teaching and Learning Managers.

7.4.1 Module evaluation process

TLMs are responsible for the coordination of the module evaluation process in each faculty (see **Figure 7.5** and **Figure 7.6** below). They work closely with DIRAP's module evaluation office. The module evaluation office is responsible for administering the module evaluations institutionally. Communication on module evaluation procedures, which modules should be evaluated, who the

[46] All faculties excluding the Faculty of Health Sciences

lecturer(s) involved in each module are, who the students enrolled in each module are and when evaluations need to be available mainly takes place between the module evaluations office and the TLMs. Results are also distributed to TLMs from the module evaluation office and TLMs are then responsible for the distribution of results within the faculty to the individual lecturers.

In all faculties, general module evaluation information, such as dates by which the module evaluation information forms must be submitted is confirmed in faculty board meetings and also emailed to HoDs. In some faculties the HoD is then expected to ensure that the message gets to all relevant lecturers, while in other faculties the email is also distributed to the lecturers themselves via the TLM's office. All TLMs have some sort of filing system to keep track of who the lecturers involved in the process are and to save and distribute module evaluation information forms and module evaluation results.

In all faculties the logistics of module evaluations requires planning. A module evaluation information form specifying when the evaluation should take place and which method should be used, is completed for each module to be evaluated in the faculty. These forms are normally completed by the lecturer(s) involved in the module who decides when a module should be evaluated and, in most cases, decides which method should be used. The module evaluation process is slightly different when the online method is selected than when the hardcopy method is selected. **Figure 7.5** below illustrates the process for online evaluations. The shaded boxes indicate where the process differs between faculties:

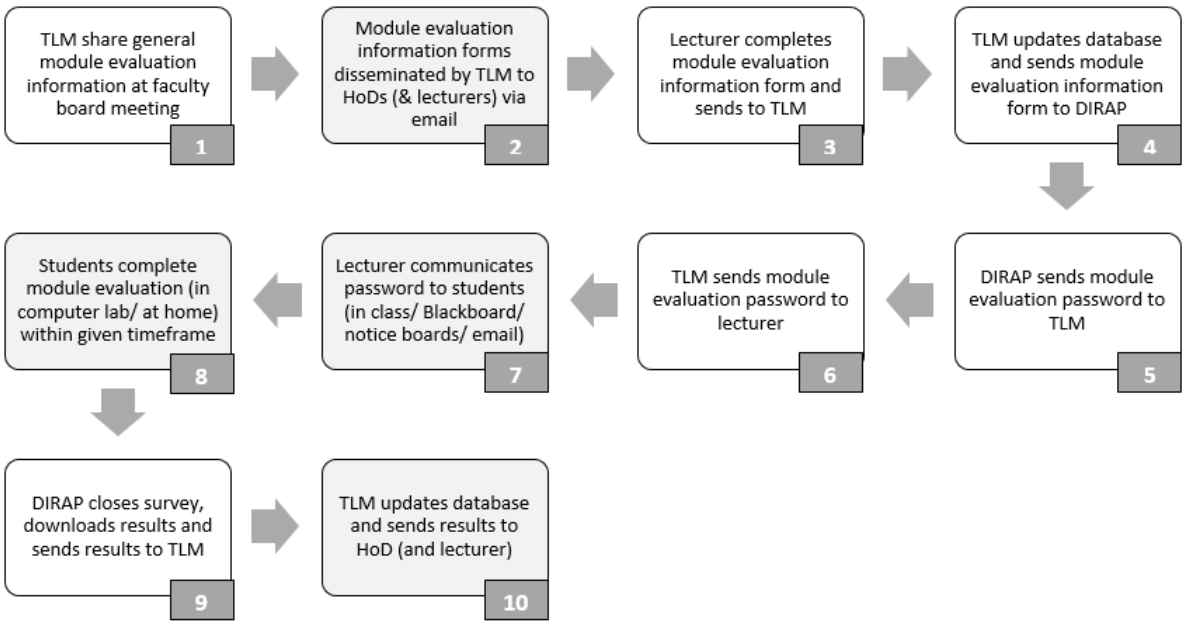


Figure 7.5: Module evaluation process for online evaluations

As was already mentioned, module evaluation information forms are distributed only to the HoDs in some faculties. TLMs of other faculties also distribute the forms to the lecturers directly (see step 2 in **Figure 7.5**).

Lecturers can choose between three different online methods: single password method, individual passwords method, and email method. For the single password method (the most frequently used online method across all faculties), a single password is generated which allows anyone with the password to complete the survey. A web link, for module evaluation surveys, together with the password is then communicated to students in class, via Blackboard or on notice boards. This differs among lecturers within faculties, and across faculties, although most lecturers communicate this information via Blackboard. If the individual password method is selected, a password is generated for each enrolled student and each password can only be used once. These passwords are then usually printed and handed out to students in class. If the email method is selected, an email is sent to all students enrolled for a module with a web link to the survey. The link is only valid for a single survey submission. Step 7 in **Figure 7.5** explains the differences in how module evaluation information is communicated to students to allow them to complete module evaluation questionnaires.

Students either complete the evaluations in their own time, or in class time in a computer laboratory. Response rates for online evaluations completed in class time in computer laboratories are generally higher than those completed in students' free time (see Chapter 6 for a more detailed analysis of response rates). Of course, booking a computer laboratory is not an option for all classes as some classes have too many students and due to a high demand in these venues, it may not always be available during timeslots in which specific classes are scheduled. When students are expected to complete the evaluations in their own time, those who complete the surveys usually do so in the open computer laboratories (on all three campuses) or on their personal computers at home. The differences in how students complete evaluations are depicted in step 8 in **Figure 7.5** above.

There are also differences in how the final step in the module evaluation process for online evaluations (step 10) are handled in different faculties. The TLM receives the results and they are responsible for the distribution of the results to the various departments and lecturers. Some TLMs send the results to the HoD and then expect the HoD to send the results to the individual lecturer and preferably also have a discussion about the results. Other TLMs send the results directly to the individual lecturer and only copy the HoD in the email. The difference in these approaches shows, to an extent, differences in how TLMs believe module evaluation results should be used, who should take responsibility for the results and the prominence of the role of the HoD in the process.

In the Faculty of the Humanities and the Faculty of Law, a decision was made in the third phase of the project to start evaluating all modules (as far as possible) in the faculty with the hardcopy method in an effort to increase response rates. In the other faculties, if the hardcopy option is selected the department is responsible for the printing costs, while in the faculty of the Humanities these costs are budgeted for and covered centrally by the teaching and learning office. Although the decision was taken to evaluate all modules with the hardcopy method in the Faculty of Law, lecturers were responsible for their own printing and the costs were covered by the various departments. The module evaluation process for hardcopy evaluations is illustrated in **Figure 7.6** below. The steps in which differences occur between faculties are, again, shaded:

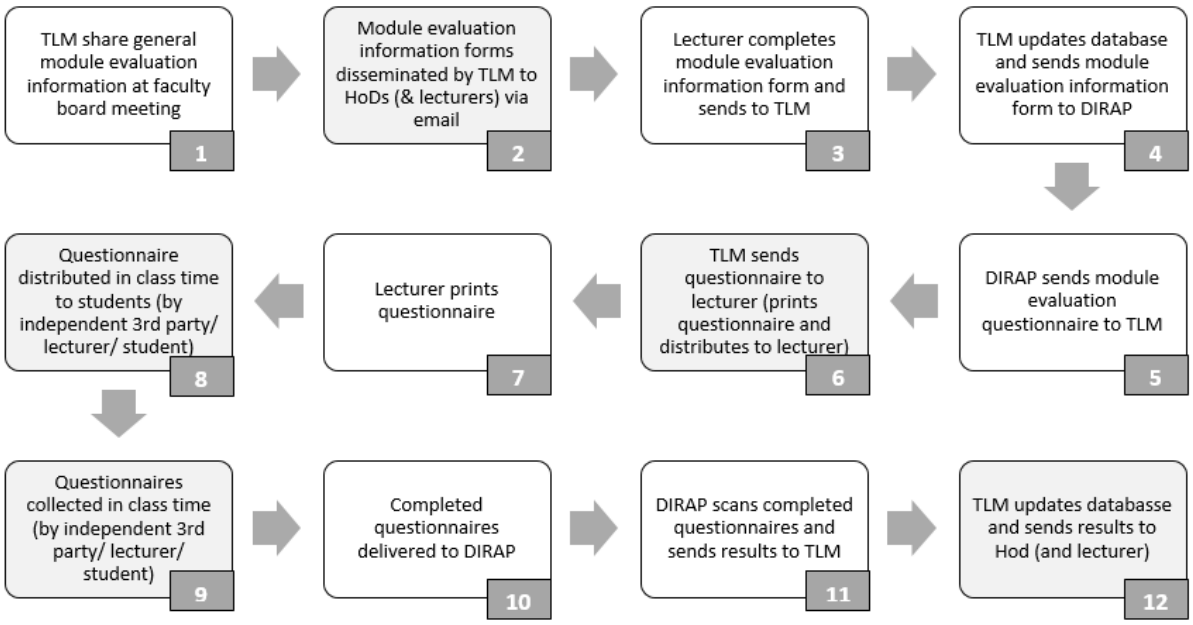


Figure 7.6: Module evaluation process for hardcopy evaluations

Module evaluation questionnaires for hardcopy distribution have a unique barcode for each module, linking the results to the module when it is scanned. These questionnaires are created centrally at DIRAP and distributed to TLMs for distribution to lecturers. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, lecturers are responsible for the printing of questionnaires in all faculties except in the Faculty of the Humanities (see step 6 in **Figure 7.6**).

The next step in the process where different approaches are taken, both within and across faculties, is step 8. In most cases module evaluation questionnaires are distributed in the last 10 minutes of class by an independent third party. An independent third party can be a tutor, student assistant, departmental assistant, or another lecturer in the department. Sometimes the lecturers themselves, however, distribute the questionnaire or a student in class is asked to hand out the questionnaires. An independent third party, or the lecturer themselves, or the student in class who distributed the questionnaire usually also collects completed questionnaires (see step 9). Even in cases where lecturers do not distribute questionnaires themselves, they are usually present when students complete the questionnaires.

The final step in the process (step 12) can also differ among faculties. As is the case with online evaluations, some TLMs send the results directly to the lecturers themselves, only copying the Head of the Department in the email, while others only send the results to the Head of the Department.

7.4.1.1 Positive aspects of institutional module evaluations

The size of the faculty, the extent to which a culture of evaluating modules is established, and the process that is followed to evaluate modules before the institutional pilot all influence the current process in each faculty. In faculties with an existing culture of module evaluations, adapting to the new institutional approach was generally less difficult in terms of gaining support and buy-in from lecturers. These faculties welcomed an institutional approach and the additional support they now received from DIRAP as the quotations below show:

> *"I think we have hit a very good system. The little hitches we can find solutions to. I can't think of a major problem that we're having. One thing I think that contributes to this is that we already have a culture of evaluating all modules and the process we followed before does not differ dramatically from the institutional system" (TLM 4).*

> *"I think because we have had evaluations every semester for years in our faculty, everybody is used to it. The culture is there. I was surprised to hear about the problems that some of the other faculties had" (TLM 6, translated from Afrikaans[47]).*

Most TLMs were also very positive about the format in which module evaluation results are presented and the short turnaround time in which they receive results (see quotation below from a TLM). The results give an overview of the average score obtained for each of the quantitative items and all responses to open-ended items are provided. Results of online evaluations are usually sent to the relevant TLM within a day or two after the survey has been closed on the online system. Hardcopy evaluations take slightly longer to process, as the completed questionnaires have to be scanned first. It usually takes approximately three to four days (but no longer than five working days) for DIRAP to send the results to the TLM.

[47] Original Afrikaans text: "Ek dink omdat ons elke semester evaluerings in ons fakulteit gehad het vir jare is almal gewoond daaraan. Die kultuur is daar. Ek was verbaas om te hoor van die probleme wat van die ander fakulteite gehad het".

"I love the EvaSys system. I love that the scanning is done over there and that the reports come out like that. The reports are in a nice format and we receive the results quickly. It works well" (TLM 4).

Generally TLMs report that there is not much wrong with the module evaluation process itself. It does not differ greatly from processes that were followed in faculties which did module evaluations in the past. The most noteworthy differences are firstly, that there is now a central point which administers a part of the process (DIRAP). Secondly, that there is now data available on faculty and institutional levels, which was not the case previously, and thirdly, the introduction of online evaluations within the institutional system. There still is a certain degree of resistance from staff toward online evaluations for different reasons, as was seen in section 7.2.2.1. Nonetheless, most TLMs have had a positive experience of institutional module evaluations thus far.

7.4.1.2 Concerns with institutional module evaluations

The biggest concern with the module evaluation process across all faculties, but especially where online evaluations are the most prevalent method of evaluation, is the low response rates obtained.

"Several lecturers were concerned about how the [module evaluation] results were going to influence their performance management because they obtained low response rates. They don't like the online version, but are also not willing to pay for the printing. I think that if response rates were better that it would have instilled greater confidence among lecturers" (TLM 1, translated from Afrikaans[48]).

"I think many [lecturers] would have wanted to use hardcopies. They link it directly to higher response rates. They were so used to the old system, and it worked well for them and they could do something with the information. Then they had to leave that which they were used to. The transition was difficult. It is still difficult" (TLM 2, translated from Afrikaans[49]).

Several faculties are keen to have students complete the evaluations on their mobile phones in class. However for this to be successful a Wi-Fi connection is required in the venue, which not all venues on all three campuses are yet equipped with. Yet, plans are in place to improve Wi-Fi across all three

[48] Original Afrikaans text: "Verskeie dosente was bekommerd oor hoe die resultate hulle prestasiebeoordeling sou beïnvloed, omdat hulle lae responskoerse gehad het. Hulle hou nie van die aanlyn weergawe nie, maar hulle is ook nie bereid om vir die drukwerk te betaal nie.Ek dink as responskoerse beter was, dit groter vertroue onder doseerpersoneel sou inboesem".
[49] Original Afrikaans text: "Ek dink baie sou graag hardekopieë wou gebruik. Hulle koppel dit direk aan hoër responskoerse. Hulle was gewoond aan die ou sisteem en dit het vir hulle goed gewerk, en hulle kon iets met die inligting doen. Toe moes hulle dit los waaraan hulle gewoond was. Die oorgang was moeilik. Dit is steeds moeilik".

campuses. One lecturer did try this method in phase 1 of the project, but was surprised to learn that his response rate was much lower than expected. He came to the conclusion that although all of the students in his class were busy on their mobile phones during the time he provided for the completion of module evaluations, not everybody was actually completing the evaluations. In order for this method to work there thus needs to be a process in place which ensures the highest possible response rate is obtained.

Online evaluations generally produce lower response rates than hardcopy evaluations (refer to section 6.4 of Chapter 6). For this reason, many lecturers are resistant towards the employment of this method of evaluation. Apart from response rates, some lecturers distrust online evaluations because there is a lack of control over who completes the evaluations. These lecturers only want students who actually attend class to complete the evaluations, as they are of the opinion that students who do not attend class are not in a position to evaluate the module. With online evaluations, students who are enrolled for the module, but do not necessarily attend class can also complete an evaluation. The quote below illustrates the distrust some lecturers have toward online evaluations:

> *"They [lecturers] want students who were in class to give feedback, because they [students who were in class] know what really happened in the module. They [lecturers] see it [students who attended class completing evaluations] as the most important thing and will act on the feedback if they know the feedback is from students who attended class. They don't know who completes the online evaluations, they don't take it as seriously" (TLM 2, translated from Afrikaans[50]).*

In faculties where module evaluations have not been compulsory for all or most modules, an additional challenge the TLMs raised was resistance from lecturers toward module evaluations in general, but also to certain aspects of the process. Some of the concerns lecturers have in general with module evaluations were described in more detail in Section 7.2 of this chapter. Mainly they distrust the results of the evaluations because they do not believe that students are in a position to evaluate a module. They do not believe that students take the process seriously, that they do not always read the questions properly and that they do not give much thought to the evaluations. They feel that only very

[50] Original Afrikaans text: "Hulle wil hê studente wat in die klas was moet terugvoer gee want hulle weet wat regtig gebeur het in die module. Hulle sien dit as die mees belangrike ding en sal optree na gelang van die terugvoer as hulle weet die terugvoer is van studente wat klas bygewoon het. Hulle weet nie wie die aanlyn evaluerings voltooi nie, hulle neem dit nie so ernstig op nie".

satisfied or dissatisfied students complete the evaluations causing results to be unreliable. As was also mentioned in the previous paragraph, lecturers also resisted the online method of evaluation because of low response rates and because of the lack of control around students who complete evaluations. The quote below describes the struggle a particular TLM has with lecturers who resist the process of module evaluations:

> *"Truly speaking, since I came here I realised this faculty was not on track and is still not on track with many things. These people [lecturers] are very difficult to change; we work slowly until they've built confidence. This one department told me flatly they did not want to do module evaluations. They said they are asked to do so many things. They said they are overloaded and students are overloaded with surveys. They said we could try it [module evaluations] but that I should not be surprised if they [students] don't complete it. I think it is more a case of we don't want to try it" (TLM 6).*

Managing resistance from lecturers adds an extra dimension to the entire process of module evaluations. It cannot be resolved simply by changing certain aspects of the process. As lecturers play such a pivotal role in module evaluations, gaining their support and buy-in to the process goes a long way in securing the effectiveness of the overall system. It remains a challenge at the UFS, which will arguably with sustained effort and over a period of time, become less of a challenge as institutional module evaluation becomes immersed in the institutional culture of the university. It is clear from the lack of resistance among staff in faculties which already had a culture of evaluating modules regularly that it is possible to eventually get all, or at least the majority of, lecturers at the university to accept and even support the process.

7.4.2 Use of module evaluation results

All TLMs acknowledge that student feedback is valuable and that it should be taken into consideration when decisions about the module are made. They all feel relatively strongly that student feedback should be taken seriously and most of the TLMs encourage lecturers in their faculties to gather input from students in more informal ways, and to not only rely on module evaluations, which are more formal in nature, as a form of student feedback.

Most TLMs are not in favour of using module evaluations for lecturer promotions (see quote below). In some faculties, however, module evaluations are used as part of a portfolio of evidence when lecturers are being considered for a promotion. Using module evaluation results to make decisions about lecturers' careers inevitably affects how they react to it and it affects how receptive they are to the entire process (see section 7.2 of this chapter). It possibly also explains, to an extent, the vulnerability which some lecturers experience when it comes to module evaluations.

> *"I hate being asked to use them [module evaluation results] in promotions committees. It [module evaluations] should be developmental not policing. Sometimes good lecturers get bad evaluations because they're hard on students. That is where I'm worried about value [of module evaluations]" (TLM 4).*

In general, TLMs use module evaluations to get a bird's eye view of how their faculty as a whole is faring, as the quote below from TLM 2 illustrates. They rarely focus on results of individual modules, although they sometimes do refer to these results if they have received a complaint about the lecturer involved or if a lecturer requests input from them in the interpretation or use of their results.

> *"I mostly look at the departmental and faculty reports. I compare individual departments' results with the results of the faculty results which will enable me to identify problems on that [departmental] level. I rarely look at results of individuals, only if I suspect that there might be a problem" (TLM 2, translated from Afrikaans[51]).*

A few TLMs mentioned how time constraints and work pressure can sometimes cause them to spend much less time on module evaluation results than they would want to. These TLMs had many ideas of how module evaluation results could ideally be used in the faculty but acknowledged that it is realistically not possible to spend enough time on the evaluation results to implement all of their ideas.

[51] Original Afrikaans text: "Ek kyk meestal na die departementele en fakulteitsverslae. Ek vergelyk departemente se resultate met die resultate van die fakulteit wat my sal toelaat om probleme op daardie vlak te identifiseer. Ek kyk selde na individue se resultate, slegs as ek vermoed dat daar 'n probleem is"

"If I see a trend I'll look into it in more detail. I try to focus on at-risk modules. I would have liked to work more intensively with individual departments, but I must honestly say that with the amount of things that are on my to-do list I never get to do that" (TLM 3, translated from Afrikaans[52]).

"I read it when I get a chance. If I'm worried about a lecturer, I read it. Mostly I just file it. I planned to speak to lecturers about it, but it hasn't worked out as I planned. There are only so many hours in a day" (TLM 4).

Generally, TLMs believed that lecturers find the student responses to the open-ended questions valuable, which is congruent with what lecturers themselves reported (see section 7.2). Some of the TLMs thought that lecturers use the results to make changes to the module or to improve the module in some way. There were also concerns among a couple of TLMs about lecturers not optimally using the quantitative results and focusing only on the qualitative results. Two TLMs were not sure how lecturers in their faculties used results, or were of the opinion that they do not use it at all, as the quote below shows:

"I have no idea [how lecturers use module evaluation results]. I only address it if a problem is brought to my attention, but actually the Head of Department is supposed to address problems. I am only there in a supportive capacity" (TLM 5, translated from Afrikaans[53]).

It was clear from the interviews with the TLMs that there are no guidelines in any of the faculties for the use of module evaluation results. Lecturers mostly use it at their own discretion. Discussions between HoDs and individual lecturers seem to mostly take place when there are problem areas identified within the results. Only one faculty really uses the results on faculty level, and reports on the results on a faculty level. TLMs themselves seem to be unsure about how exactly they should use the results in order for it to be meaningful and even if they do have some innovative ideas on how the results could be used, they rarely have the time to use it in these ways. Despite acknowledging the value that student feedback adds to teaching and learning, and despite supporting the idea of module evaluations, there seems to be a lack of structure when it comes to actually using the results, even in faculties with an established culture of regularly evaluating modules. Addressing the issue of how

[52] Original Afrikaans text: "As ek 'n tendens sien sal ek daarna kyk. Ek probeer fokus op die risiko-modules. Ek sou graag meer intensief met individuele departemente wou werk, maar ek moet eerlikwaar sê dat met die hoeveelheid goed wat op my te-doen-lysie is, ek dit nooit doen nie"

[53] Original Afrikaans text: "Ek het geen idee nie. Ek spreek dit slegs aan as daar 'n probleem is, maar eintlik is die Departementshoof veronderstel om probleme aan te spreek. Ek is slegs daar in 'n ondersteunende hoedanigheid"

module evaluations can contribute to improvements in teaching and learning and student performance might be a step in the right direction to ensure that module evaluations are truly meaningful at the UFS.

7.5 Conclusion

In this chapter I presented the qualitative findings of the research which explored the primary stakeholder experiences of module evaluations at the UFS. The findings presented in this chapter provided a comprehensive insight into these stakeholder experiences and so answered the first research sub-question (How do primary stakeholders experience module evaluations?) of this study.

The findings highlighted the divergent views within stakeholder groups (for example, among lecturers), as well as between stakeholder groups (for example, between students and lecturers). It further highlighted the importance of having a firm understanding of the experiences of the people most directly affected by module evaluations in attempts to improve the module evaluation process at an institution. The findings show that some lecturers are distrustful of their students. This is likely to affect the value these lecturers consider student feedback to add to their teaching practices. The findings further highlighted that many students are unsure of how module evaluations are used, this is likely to affect how seriously they take the module evaluation process. Moreover, module evaluations as a process is more ingrained in the culture of some faculties, where TLMs already have an established way of handling and using module evaluation results. Other faculties are still in the process of developing such a culture and in these faculties TLMs still have to manage resistance from staff. In institutionalising module evaluations at the UFS, all of these factors need to be considered, which adds to the complexity of the task.

Chapter 8: Towards a system for module evaluations at the UFS

8.1 Introduction

> *"The systems thinking process in itself is logical, systematic, and analytical. It involves carefully analysing the nature of the system, of adjoining and interacting systems in the environment, of the characters involved and, most importantly, of the actions that will occur as a result of actions decided upon" (Dawidowicz, 2012, p.3).*

Systems thinking as the theoretical framework for this study was discussed in Chapter 4. The principles identified in Chapter 4 have been applied in this chapter to the findings of the research presented in the previous two chapters. As I discussed in Chapter 4 it is necessary to be both systemic and systematic in order to change or improve a system (Ison, 2008). It is therefore important to first conceptualise module evaluations at the UFS as a system in its own right and, at the same time, understand the dynamics of the module evaluation system before systematic steps can be taken to improve or change the system. In the following sections of this chapter, the components that make up the module evaluation system will be analysed after which systems thinking principles are applied to module evaluations to understand the dynamics of the system. This understanding then provides the basis from which recommendations for further improvement can be made.

8.2 Components of the module evaluation system

The components of a system as put forward by Bess and Dee (2012) were applied to the UFS as an institution in Chapter 4. In this chapter I will apply the same components to module evaluations to show that although module evaluations are an institutional process at the UFS (and can thus be seen as

a subsystem of the UFS), module evaluations can also be conceptualised as a system in its own right. If module evaluations are seen as a system, the UFS is then part of the larger environment in which the module evaluations system exists. This conceptualisation has implication for how we think about, plan, implement and assess the institutional module evaluation process (system).

8.2.1 The system

Although the environment in which a system is located is not directly part of the system per se, it does have an important influence on the system. The UFS is the environment in which the module evaluation system is located. The Quality Enhancement Policy and the Teaching and Learning Policy of the university are examples of policies that have an effect on the module evaluation system and how module evaluations are conducted at the institution. The student feedback culture within the institution, in addition, has an effect on how module evaluations are experienced by its stakeholders. The external environment of the UFS, which was described in more detail in Chapter 4, has an effect on policies and workings of the university, thus eventually also affects the module evaluation system. The increased focus placed on quality teaching and learning in higher education in South Africa, which was highlighted in Chapter 2, affects policies and practices within the UFS as the institution seeks to ensure that quality in teaching and learning is addressed as per national requirements. In turn, these institutional policies and practices affect the module evaluation system as more emphasis is placed on being accountable for quality in teaching and learning.

8.2.2 Boundaries

This study has shown that the module evaluation system is complex with relatively open boundaries. With open boundaries, the environment of the system has a more direct impact on the system, compared to systems with closed boundaries. The boundaries that separate module evaluations from its environment are more intangible than is the case with the UFS as a system (see Chapter 4).

There are no physical boundaries separating the module evaluation system from its environment. Instead, the module evaluation system is separated from its environment and subsystems by the

processes and procedures that govern it, though such procedures are currently in the process of being formalised within the institution. This lack of formalisation further opens the module evaluation system boundaries, sometimes compromising the functioning of the module evaluation system. As was discussed in Chapter 1 the lack of official or formal procedures to govern module evaluations institutionally is one of the reasons why this study is valuable. The results reported in Chapters 6 and 7 show that the inconsistent way in which module evaluations are conducted is limiting the effectiveness of the system. There is thus an urgent need for formal procedures to govern module evaluations at the UFS. Despite the lack of official institutional module evaluation procedures, module evaluations are still conducted through unofficial procedures, and the module evaluation system thus functions within the institution, albeit in somewhat ad hoc ways at present. The module evaluation procedures for hardcopy and online evaluations using the EvaSys system (documented in Chapter 7) are examples of how module evaluations are currently conducted at the institution despite these procedures not being formally stated in any policy or other formal documents at institutional level.

Furthermore, membership is another example of a boundary that is not physical. The primary stakeholders: students who provide feedback, lecturers who use feedback on a classroom level, and TLMs who use module evaluation results on a faculty level are examples of members of the system. The membership boundary is enforced through access control to specific modules, which also makes it an impermeable boundary. Only the students enrolled in the relevant module have access to complete the evaluation. Access to the evaluation is thus restricted based on the enrolment status of the student. Furthermore, the results of all module evaluations in a faculty are distributed to the relevant TLM, who then distributes the results on a module-level to the lecturer(s) involved in the module. Access to the results of the evaluations are therefore also restricted to the members of the module evaluation system. Hence, the primary stakeholders of the module evaluation system – students, lecturers, and TLMs – are the members of the module evaluation system.

8.2.3 Subsystems

The sub-systems of the module evaluation system also influence the workings of the system. Bess and Dee (2012, p.100) classified sub-systems in four categories (refer back to Chapter 4):

1. Production subsystems are concerned with processing raw material to create final products. In the module evaluation system students, who are responsible for completing module evaluations, lecturers and TLMs who are responsible for using module evaluations are examples of production subsystems. The products in this case will be completed module evaluation questionnaires and module evaluation results being used on classroom and faculty levels.
2. Supportive subsystems assist and enable production subsystems in the production process. DIRAPs module evaluation office is an example of a supportive subsystem as this office is responsible for the distribution of module evaluation questionnaires to the relevant students and to distribute the module evaluation results to the relevant lecturers and TLMs.
3. Maintenance subsystems facilitate human dynamics within the system and enable them to do their work. ICT services, who are responsible for maintaining the EvaSys software and the information technology infrastructure required for online module evaluations is a maintenance subsystem for the institutional module evaluation system.
4. Adaptive subsystems are responsible for considering the long-term survival of the system. DIRAP, the department which hosts the institutional module evaluation office and that is responsible for institutional research is an adaptive subsystem as it monitors institutional trends and continuously monitors the module evaluation environment.
5. Managerial subsystems are responsible for decision-making. The Academic Planning and Development Committee of Senate (APDC) is an example of a managerial subsystem of the module evaluation system. This committee is responsible for the approval of the institutional module evaluation procedures and approved the institutional module evaluation pilot.

Figure 8.1 is an illustration of the UFS institutional module evaluation system, based on the understandings that emerged during this action research study, demonstrating the system with all

its components. In addition to the discussion in the above sections, describing the components of the module evaluation system, **Figure 8.1** highlights how complex the module evaluation system is in practice and perhaps helps us to understand why formalising an institutional module evaluation system has proved so challenging. Lecturers, students and TLMs are members of the module evaluation system, but the roles that they fulfil mean that they also comprise the production subsystem. DIRAP's module evaluation office is a supportive subsystem but is also a division within DIRAP, which is in itself an adaptive subsystem. The complexity of the system highlights the need to be fully aware of the dynamics within the system to ultimately be able to make recommendations for the improvement of the system as a whole. In the next section of this chapter the dynamics of the system will be discussed.

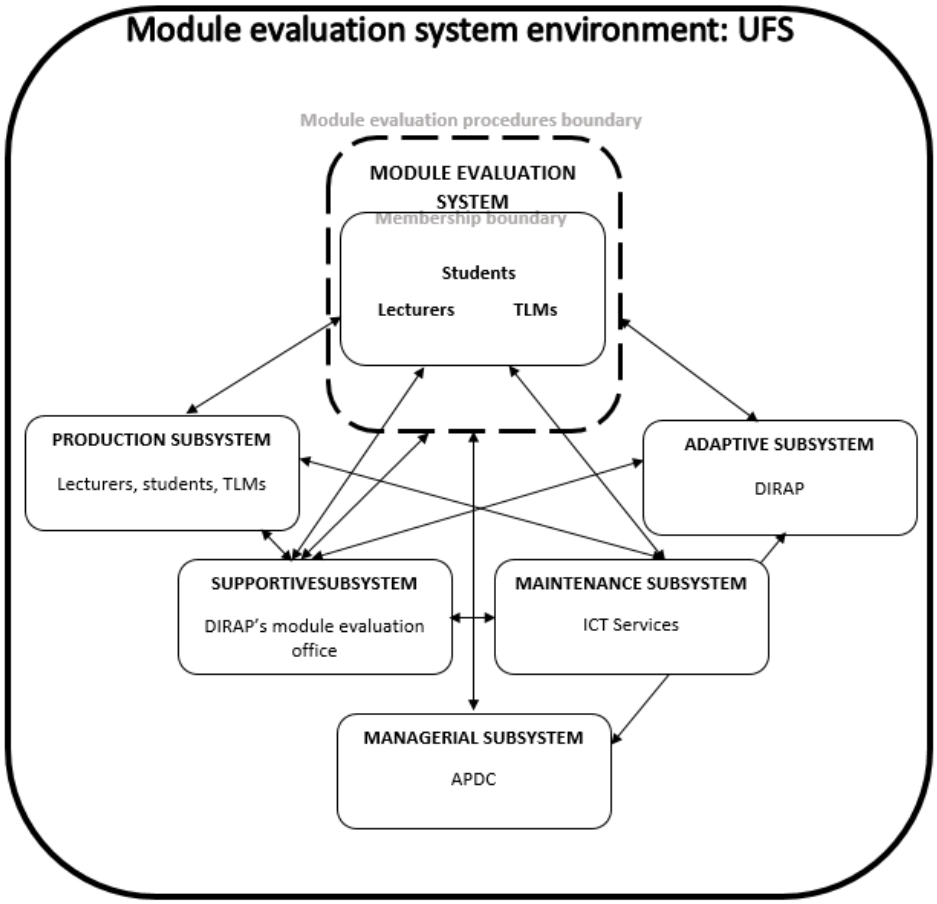


Figure 8.1: Illustration of the UFS module evaluation system

8.3 Dynamics of the module evaluation system

The underlying assumptions of systems thinking, which are at the root of understanding systems thinking as a practical approach to problem solving can now be applied to the module evaluation system to understand the dynamics within the system. These assumptions were discussed in Chapter 4, but I will apply them to the institutional module evaluation system of the UFS in the following sections of this chapter. The theoretical specification of systems thinking assumptions presents the environment as an assumption in its own right. However, in this study it did not seem appropriate to consider the environment in which module evaluations functioning independently from discussion of the system itself (see 8.2) as well as the discussion about the assumption of relationships as these elements of the system were so closely entangled. For this reason, the importance of the environment in which the module evaluation system is located is discussed across the assumptions presented below, and in particular in section 8.3.2 which focuses on relationships.

8.3.1 Holism

Holism requires one to take a step back and view the system as a whole without getting caught up in the complicated workings of the system. Module evaluations have been positioned as a system in its own right in section 8.2 of this chapter. **Figure 8.1** also provided a bird's eye view of module evaluations as a system and showed module evaluations as part of a larger environment and its subsystems. The principle of holism and its visual expression in Figure 8.1 serve to bring the system into view, highlighting the inter-relatedness of numerous subsystems, some of which may not have been considered as part of the module evaluation process and so not taken into account in planning and implementation processes. This also means that the implications of interventions to enhance the system (e.g. changing the questions on the module evaluation instrument, or changing the timing of module evaluations) need to take account of the all the subsystems that are likely to be affected. Similarly, changes or events in any of the subsystems (e.g. maintenance work done by ICT), even though not necessarily directly related to module evaluations also impact on the functioning of the

system, for example if the ICT platform needs to be shut down for maintenance at the same time that a particular lecturer has requested students to complete online evaluations.

8.3.2 Relationships

In order to understand the dynamics of a system it is essential to understand the relationships within a system. This includes the relationship between the system and its environment and between the system and its subsystems. I have briefly described these relationships in section 8.2 of this chapter, but will expand on it in this section.

8.3.2.1 Relationship between the module evaluation system and its environment

As was already mentioned, the institutional module evaluation system functions within the UFS environment. The UFS is a higher education institution and, as is common across the higher education sector, its main focuses are teaching and learning, research, and community engagement. The university needs to be accountable for the quality of its teaching and learning, its research, and its community engagement activities; but it is specifically in an attempt to be accountable for the quality of teaching and learning that module evaluations come into play. Module evaluations are, in essence, one key measure that can be used to assess quality of teaching and learning. The relationship between module evaluations and the UFS is thus characterised by the role that module evaluations play in the UFS' quality enhancement framework to, as part of an evidence-based approach, serve as a measurement of the quality of teaching and learning. The mere existence of the module evaluations system is enabled by this relationship. This relationship dictates the purpose of the module evaluation system.

Although the UFS environment and the need to be accountable for the quality of teaching and learning is a necessary requirement for the module evaluation system to exist, the lack of formalised procedures governing the module evaluation currently impedes the functioning (both effectiveness and efficiency) of the module evaluation system. A positive aspect is that module evaluations as a process is not entirely new at the university and so there is some institutional base and memory on

which to build. Prior to the institutional module evaluation pilot in 2013, some modules in at least all 6 faculties included in the pilot had been evaluated and each faculty had its own procedures in place for module evaluations. The inconsistent manner in which module evaluations were handled across the institution was a concern, however, as the data could not be used on an institutional level as a measure of quality of teaching and learning. With the development of an institutional module evaluation questionnaire, which is now used across all faculties, and by recognising the need for formalised institutional procedures the inconsistency with which modules were evaluated in the past has begun to be addressed. The pilot also provided an opportunity for institutional procedures to be formalised, even though this process has outlived this particular study. Once formal institutional module evaluation procedures have been established, the module evaluation system will be able to function more effectively within the UFS environment.

8.3.2.2 Relationship between the module evaluation system and its subsystems

The module evaluation subsystems allow the module evaluation system to function. The arrows in Figure 8.1 are indicative of the relationships between the system and its subsystems and the relationships among subsystems. Each of the key system and subsystem relations are analysed below.

Relationship between module evaluation system and its production subsystem

The production subsystem, consisting of lecturers, students and TLMs, enables the module evaluation system to produce its products. The module evaluation system produces two main products or outcomes: module evaluation results (produced by students) and using module evaluation results to understand and improve teaching and learning, which lecturers and TLMs are responsible for. Students provide feedback on their learning experience on a module-level by completing a module evaluation questionnaire for each module, which produces module evaluation results. Each lecturer involved in a module receives the results of all the completed questionnaires for their module and is then responsible to use it at the classroom-level. TLMs receive results on departmental and faculty-levels and are responsible for looking at trends in the results and use it on a faculty-level.

For the module evaluation system to be able to produce useful products, it is essential that all three components are present: feedback from students, lecturers addressing feedback in their classes, and TLMs using trends on a faculty-level. If any one of these components is missing or is not functioning optimally, the module evaluation system does not work properly. As these components are wholly dependent on people, the relationships between the people involved affect the production of the module evaluation products. Therefore the relationships between students, lecturers and TLMs are vital in the module evaluation system. The results presented in Chapter 6 and 7 provided valuable insight into these relationships.

Some students choose not to complete module evaluations because they are not sure that their feedback is really taken seriously or even considered at all by their lecturers. Students are unsure of how module evaluations are used because they do not get any feedback from their lecturers upon completing the evaluations (see section 7.3.1.2). The feedback loop is thus not closed. Students provide feedback but do not receive recognition for their efforts. Even if their feedback is addressed, lecturers usually address it with the next group of students and not the group that provided the feedback (see section7.2.2.2 and 7.3.1.3). The fact that students reported being unsure of how their feedback is used affects, firstly, whether they take module evaluations seriously – which in turn affects the quality of feedback they provide. It secondly affects whether students provide feedback at all. If the feedback loop is not closed students may be reluctant to even go through the trouble of completing the questionnaire in the first place, or if they do still complete the evaluation, may not put the expected effort or care into their response. Students' ideas and perceptions of how seriously lecturers take the module evaluation process thus affects how seriously they take the process themselves. This situation is exacerbated when lecturers do not explain to students why module evaluations are important and why they should complete the evaluations. Although lecturers often encourage students to complete evaluations by reminding students to complete online evaluations or by asking students to complete hardcopy questionnaires in class, they do not always emphasise the importance of completing it or the value they, as lecturers, place on student feedback (see section 7.2.2.2). This means that students are aware that they have an opportunity to complete module

evaluations, but they are not always aware of why they should complete it, and so miss the opportunity of having their voices and experiences taken into account in teaching and learning considerations as well as larger quality enhancement processes.

In turn lecturers do not believe that students are always honest in their feedback. Some lecturers reported that they are not convinced that students are in a position to evaluate the module in the first place (see section 7.2.1). This leads to lecturers not taking the module evaluation results seriously and thus not using the results optimally to gain insight into their students' learning experience. Lecturers thus miss the opportunity to make adjustments and improvements, where feasible, to their teaching. In this case the second product of the module evaluation system, to use the results of module evaluations, is not produced. This response by lecturers then also confirm students' beliefs that their feedback is not taken seriously.

Lecturers who do value student feedback and use the results to make adjustments to their teaching, usually do so without providing feedback to the students from whom they obtained the feedback. They usually incorporate the feedback into their modules for the group of students that follow, as module evaluations are completed at the end of a module and there is not time for them to make any changes for the same group of students who provided the feedback (see section 7.2.2.2). In this case, although the second product of the module evaluation system is produced, the students who provide the feedback are still not sure of how their feedback is used and so do not themselves benefit from providing feedback, so once again the feedback loop is not closed. This ultimately leads to students being discouraged from completing module evaluations in the future.

Systems thinking tells us that if the module evaluation system continues to function as it currently does it is likely to eventually cease to produce either one of the essential two products for which the system was set up. Even if some students continue to complete module evaluations, response rates are unlikely to increase if students do not understand why they need to complete module evaluations and if students do not benefit from completing module evaluations. Furthermore, some students may continue to complete module evaluations, but the quality of the feedback they provide may not be

what it ought to be for the feedback to be meaningful and hence useful for quality enhancement. If response rates are low and the quality of feedback is not good lecturers will also not be able to use module evaluation results for the improvement of their practice. The relationship between students and lecturers is therefore crucial in the efficiency and effectiveness of the system. Students need to know that their feedback is valued and need to benefit from providing feedback and lecturers need to know that students are willing to provide feedback on their learning experience and that they take module evaluations seriously.

Sufficient response rates are required for module evaluations to be meaningful on a faculty-level. Although there is no direct relationship between TLMs and students, TLMs are dependent on students completing module evaluations for them to be able to use the results on a faculty-level. There is, on the other hand, a direct relationship between lecturers and TLMs. TLMs are dependent on lecturers buy-in to the module evaluation process for them to be able to fulfil their role in the module evaluation system. Because TLMs look at faculty trends, ideally they need to be able to discuss these trends with lecturers. Lecturers need to be open to discussing their individual results compared to the results of their department and faculty. Some TLMs report struggling with resistance from lecturers which makes it difficult for TLMs to optimally use module evaluation results (see section 7.4.1 and 7.4.2). In this case TLMs can look at faculty-results but find it challenging to use the results for improvement of teaching and learning if lecturers are not open to using the results. In the faculties with an established module evaluation culture, the relationship between TLMs and lecturers tends to be more open to the optimal use of module evaluation results on a faculty-level (see section 7.4).

Relationship between the module evaluation system and its supportive subsystem

The supportive subsystem – DIRAP's module evaluation office - enables the production subsystem (students, lecturers, TLMs) to produce its products (completed module evaluations). The main point of contact between DIRAP's module evaluation office and the production subsystem is the TLMs. TLMs send information about the modules to be evaluated in each faculty to the module evaluation office where it is used to generate and distribute module evaluation questionnaires to the relevant

students. The module evaluation office then sends module evaluation results to TLMs on module-, departmental-, and faculty-level.

Communication between the module evaluation office and TLMs is thus important in the efficiency and effectiveness of the module evaluation system. TLMs need to send information accurately and timeously to the module evaluation office to enable the module evaluation office to make module evaluations available to students. The current nature of the relationship between the module evaluation office and the TLMs seems to allow this part of the module evaluation system to function efficiently. The correct students get access to module evaluation questionnaires at the correct times, surveys are closed at the correct times and TLMs get results timeously. As was discussed in Chapter 7, TLMs have mentioned the additional support from the module evaluation office in the administration of the module evaluation process to be a positive aspect of module evaluations (see section 7.4.1). Before the institutional module evaluation pilot faculties did not have the support from a centrally operated division in the administration of module evaluations.

Relationship between the module evaluation system and its maintenance subsystem

The ICT services division at the UFS is responsible for maintaining the EvaSys software and the information technology infrastructure required for online module evaluations as well as the scan stations for hard copy scanning. The relationship in question in this case is between ICT Services and the module evaluation office. This relationship appears to function effectively as there have not been any recorded instances where EvaSys was not working properly or where students were unable to complete online module evaluations.

Several meetings between the ICT Services and the module evaluation office were held during the institutional module evaluation pilot to plan and manage EvaSys. Both of these divisions are also involved when the software is annually upgraded to a newer version. ICT Services then take responsibility for the technical side, ensuring that the upgrade is installed correctly, and the module evaluation office tests the functioning of the program on a business-end.

Although this relationship appears to function effectively, there have nonetheless been challenges that needed to be overcome during the pilot. One example of such a challenge, was the continued difficulty experienced in increasing online response rates. A possible reason for low online response rates by using the email method (see section 7.4 for a detailed overview of the online evaluation process), is that students do not always use their official UFS student email addresses. Many students use their own private emails, and these email addresses are not always stored on the UFS database or on Blackboard. Institutional discussions around this issue has been taking place for quite some time now and one suggestion to address this issue is to use the UFS student email addresses as the main form of official communication to students from the university, thus forcing students to use their student email addresses on a more regular basis. These discussions, however, are a part of larger institutional initiatives but it will have an effect on the module evaluation system.

Relationship between the adaptive and managerial subsystems

In DIRAP's role as adaptive subsystem, it is responsible through institutional research and the monitoring of institutional trends over time, and by hosting the module evaluation office, to ensure the longevity of the module evaluation system. DIRAP specifically has an important influence on the module evaluation system as procedures will be refined over time to ensure that the process works as effectively as possible. The relationship in question at this level, is between DIRAP and the managerial subsystem, the APDC, as the APDC is ultimately responsible for official decisions about module evaluation procedures. DIRAP, by making use of data gathered throughout the module evaluation process, makes recommendations concerning module evaluation procedures to the APDC who is then in a position to either approve or decline the recommendations. This relationship is important for the prolonged existence of the module evaluation system, the level of efficiency at which the system functions, and improvements over time. The relationship between DIRAP and the APDC is also critical for embedding module evaluation processes within the academic structures of the university, so enhancing buy-in to the ongoing improvement of the module evaluation system itself, as well as quality enhancement of teaching and learning.

8.3.3 Interdeterminism

Interdeterminism is an important underlying assumption of systems thinking to understand as it forces one to be aware of and so to take explicit account of the complexity of the workings of a system. Interdeterminism is the acknowledgement of unpredictability of the effects that interventions in a system may have. It reminds one to plan for the possibility of unintended consequences. When attempts are made to improve a system by implementing interventions within the parts of the system, an awareness of the consequences (intended and unintended) that interventions may have on all the different parts of the system is required. Unpredicted consequences can be identified from the results of this study which were discussed in Chapter 6 and Chapter 7. These, along with the possible unintended consequences of recommended interventions will be discussed in this section.

8.3.3.1 Response rates

The first product of the module evaluation system is completed module evaluation questionnaires which is, in essence, student feedback on teaching and learning. For the system to be able to produce the second product, that of using module evaluation results to improve teaching and learning, the availability of student feedback per se is not sufficient, the feedback needs to be useful. Student feedback cannot be optimally used if sufficient response rates are not obtained. Obtaining sufficient response rates is thus essential in the functioning of the module evaluation system.

We know from the literature on module evaluations (see section 2.2.4.3) that encouraging students to complete the evaluations by reminding them to complete it (in the case of online evaluations) and by explaining the value of the evaluations is one way to improve response rates (Ballantyne, 2003; Crews & Curtis, 2011). Yet, as was discussed in Chapter 6, some of the lecturers interviewed who made an effort to encourage students to complete the module evaluations by explaining to students why module evaluations are important and how student feedback is useful, and is used to improve their practice, have still obtained low response rates. Thus, despite this intervention, response rates obtained were still low compared to response rates of other modules evaluated in their respective

faculties. Furthermore, in contrast, there were also examples of lecturers who did not encourage their students to complete the evaluations of their modules at all and were actually apathetic about module evaluations, yet still obtained high response rates (see section 6.4.1).

How can this be explained, and how does systems thinking provide us with conceptual tools to tackle this apparent contradiction? These contradictory results show that encouraging students to complete module evaluations alone does not necessarily improve response rates. Systems thinking, and in particular the assumption of interdeterminism, reminds us that response rates are dependent on many factors within a complex system and it is the presence (or absence) of combinations of these factors that results in how high (or low) response rates. For example, it is possible that students, despite being encouraged by lecturers to complete the evaluations, opted not to complete it because of the timing of the evaluations. If the evaluations take place at the end of a module students know that the feedback they provide will not benefit them. Or perhaps (for a number of reasons from ICT system upgrades to load shedding) students were not able to log on to the survey system at the time they attempted to complete the evaluation. Another reason for low response rates may be due to poor class attendance. If only a few students attend class, only a few students are exposed to a lecturer's attempt to encourage completion of the evaluations and even though these students may have completed evaluations the overall response rate of the module may still be low. In this case it is necessary to reach the majority of students enrolled in a module in the effort to encourage them to complete module evaluations and methods other than addressing students in class need to be considered, such as announcements on Blackboard which also explains that module evaluations are important and that does not only provide a link for students to complete the evaluations. However, this approach would only really provide useful feedback if questions regarding why class attendance is low are also included so that this particular characteristic of a given module can be assessed. It is also possible that the lecturer's behaviour or teaching style throughout the module did not indicate that he/she values student feedback. For example, the lecturer may not have been open to students' participation in class, to student questions and to other forms of engaging with students in the teaching and learning process. In this case students may have been unaffected by the lecturer's attempt to encourage them to

complete module evaluations because they did not interpret the message as sincere. It is also possible that due to students' overall experiences of module evaluation they have been led to believe that it is not important for them to complete module evaluations. The encouragement of one or two lecturers to complete the evaluations may in this case not convince these students otherwise. This last explanation is particularly relevant in contexts where students are required to complete multiple module evaluations within a given course which is taught by multiple lecturers.

Both students and lecturers did recommend making module evaluations compulsory for students to complete in an effort to increase response rates (see section 7.2.2.4 and 7.3.1.6). This was a somewhat unexpected recommendation made by the students, but it shows that students want module evaluations to be important, that they want to have a voice in teaching and learning discussions, and so making it compulsory adds to the importance of and value placed on module evaluations. Students argued that if they are required to complete module evaluations, lecturers will then be required to consider their feedback. Lecturers want module evaluations to be compulsory because it should automatically increase response rates. However, implementing an intervention which makes module evaluations compulsory for students to complete should be carefully considered precisely because of the assumption of interdeterminism and unexpected consequences. Although compulsory module evaluations will force students to complete the evaluations and thus increase response rates, it cannot ensure that students take the evaluation seriously, read the questions carefully and try to provide meaningful, carefully considered feedback. In fact, no intervention can ever 'force' students to provide quality feedback. Quality feedback from students can be encouraged by closing the feedback loop to ensure that students also get feedback from lecturers on module evaluation results. Students may also be encouraged to provide quality feedback if they themselves eventually benefit from the feedback they provide and they have concrete examples of how their feedback has been applied for improvement.

As discussed at various points in this dissertation, increasing response rates is complex, but also necessary for the success of the institutional module evaluation system. A slight increase in response rates (especially among online evaluations) over the period of the 3 phases of this study is, however, a

positive sign. As a more consistent approach is followed in the evaluation of modules across the institution, students and lecturers may start growing accustomed to the process of module evaluations and module evaluations may eventually become ingrained in the culture of the university.

8.3.3.2 Use of module evaluation results

The second product of the module evaluation system is that of the use of module evaluation results. At present there are no formal guidelines for using module evaluation results, and to date, use has been rather ad hoc and often driven by a particular lecturer or TLM. In most cases lecturers use the results to see whether there is something they can change in their teaching to improve the students' learning experience. In some faculties lecturers are asked to include module evaluation results as part of a portfolio they submit when they are applying for promotion. As was also seen from the results presented in Chapter 7, HoDs rarely discuss module evaluation results with lecturers if the results are good (see section 7.2.2.3). Discussions mostly take place when problems are identified in the results. TLMs also reported that they will spend more time on the results of an individual lecturer if they have received complaints about the lecturer or if the results of a particular module is below the average of the department or faculty (see section 7.4.2). It thus appears that module evaluation results are found useful when they identify a problem, or if performance is below the average of module evaluation results on departmental or faculty-levels. Based on this study, it seems that little is done with positive results. Positive results are useful when lecturers are being considered for promotion, but apart using module evaluations for this purpose the results are only discussed with lecturers if it was not on par. Discussions about the results only take place for remedial purposes, it seems, yet the sharing of positive results would provide a useful basis, embedded in the specific practices and conventions of particular disciplines and faculties, to contribute to reflections on ongoing quality enhancement.

Furthermore, the effect module evaluation results might have on a lecturer's career trajectory and promotion process leads to lecturers feeling vulnerable or exposed. Yet, as was discussed in Chapter 7 this vulnerability is experienced despite only a part of the module evaluation questionnaire actually being about the lecturer. If this is the effect that having their modules evaluated has on many lecturers,

what does it mean for lecturers valuing student feedback? What does it mean for the relationship between lecturers and students? Has the institutionalisation of a module evaluation system, as opposed to ad hoc faculty specific approaches, created a situation in which lecturers fear student feedback rather than see feedback as an essential component of their own reflection on their teaching and learning?

Thus, this study has shown that in an attempt to make module evaluations useful for the institution, it has, in some instances, had the unintended consequence of making lecturers feel vulnerable and of changing the emphasis from 'feedback on the module' to 'feedback on the lecturer'. If lecturers are feeling vulnerable in the module evaluation process it affects how receptive they are to student feedback. Yet, their receptiveness toward student feedback is crucial to produce the second product of the module evaluation system – to use module evaluation results to improve teaching and learning.

8.3.4 Causality

System thinking assumes that causality is circular. This means that causality is a series of events, each event taking place as a consequence of the previous event, but instead of ending with a final event, the last event again affects the first event and so it continues. Evidence of this circular nature of causality was also evident in the module evaluation system being researched in this study. The most apparent example of circular causality of the module evaluation system is the module evaluation process which was described in section 7.4.1 in Chapter 7.

There is presently a process for hardcopy evaluations and a separate process for online evaluations. Both processes basically start off with TLMs gathering module evaluation information forms from lecturers in the faculty indicating when modules should be evaluated and which method should be used. These information forms are sent to the module evaluation office, where it is processed and the questionnaires are made available to students which can be either in a hardcopy format or by opening an online questionnaire. Next, students complete the evaluations after which the module evaluation office extracts the module evaluation results, after either scanning hardcopy forms or closing an online questionnaire, and then sends the results off to the TLMs who distribute it to the relevant

lecturers. Lecturers then use the results by making changes to the module in some instances where it is feasible and where the lecturer is open to using the results to improve teaching and learning. The next group of students enters a module and the process starts all over again, hopefully with some improvements based on the previous round of feedback. **Figure 8.2** is an illustration of the circular nature of module evaluations.

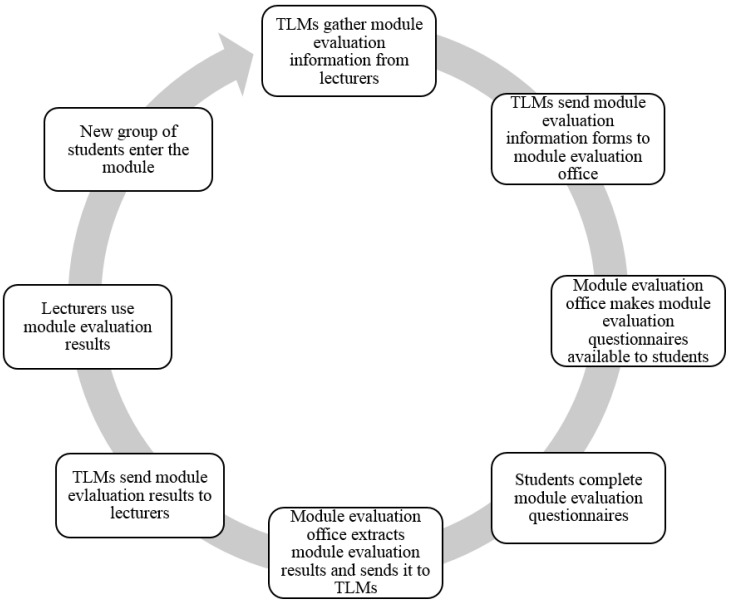


Figure 8.2: Illustration of the circular causality of the UFS module evaluation system

The module evaluation process is circular given that there is no clear end to the process. Although the process starts again with new students, it does not end. Lecturers use the results of a group of students and by using the results it affects the learning experience of the next group of students who then provide feedback which is then again used by the lecturer. The circular nature of the process should ensure that the quality of teaching and learning continuously improves, but this depends on how the results are used. Improving teaching and learning is not a single event, it is a continuous process.

It is clear from the module evaluation process illustrated in **Figure 8.2** that the continuation of the process is dependent on the system producing its two products: student feedback and using module evaluation results. If either of these two products are not produced the system cannot continue to function properly. If students, for example, do not provide feedback (first product) there will be no

module evaluation results for lecturers to use (second product). If students do produce module evaluation results but lecturers do not use the results the process ends at the lecturers receiving the results and the process has thus become linear. The process can only be circular if lecturers use module evaluation results to enhance the quality of the teaching and learning within a module which then affects the next group of students who provide feedback which is again used by the lecturer and so on.

8.3.5 Observation

An observer's observations are dependent on his/her perception and are shaped by the person's unique history and experiences. It is not possible to remove the observer completely from the observation and it is therefore necessary to understand the observer's worldview as it allows him/her to construct meaning of observations. The observations that I have made in this study were also dependent on my worldview and my unique experiences. This means that as the researcher I needed to be aware of how my observations were affected by my own worldview and experiences in order to truly be able to construct meaning from the observations.

Pragmatism has always resonated with me. I find the idea of doing research with a view of finding practical solutions to real-world problems appealing. I have always been able to see the value of objective and subjective knowledge and therefore I am comfortable with being able to use quantitative, qualitative methods or a combination of both to enable me to find answers to questions. It was with this view of the world that I was able to set out to answer the research questions of this study, which required a level of openness to the use of different research methods and an appreciation of subjective and objective knowledge. Pragmatism has allowed me to make finding answers to the research questions a central part of this study without constraining me to specific methodologies or a prescriptive research design.

At the start of the institutional module evaluation project, I was a part of the project through my employment in DIRAP. I was responsible for carrying out research on the stakeholder experiences of module evaluations at the UFS and was part of the team tasked with developing a new institutional

module evaluation instrument. At the same time, I was also responsible for the administration of the module evaluation process from the central module evaluation office in DIRAP. It was during the time I was conducting research on the stakeholder experiences of module evaluations, that I decided to use the data as part of a Master's dissertation. It was beneficial for me to be directly involved from the start of the institutional module evaluation pilot as it allowed me to truly understand the objectives behind institutionalising module evaluations, as well as to gain an understanding of how module evaluations worked at the UFS. Integrating this study with my work also enriched my working experience, as I was approaching my work in a critically reflective manner. The benefits of integrating work and studies aside, being so closely involved in the research did make it difficult to remain objective. Although the use of action research methodology and the positioning of the study in the pragmatist paradigm means that the assumption of complete objectivity was not made, a certain degree of objectivity is nonetheless necessary in the analysis of the data.

Before the end of the pilot project, however, I moved to another division at the UFS (CTL) and was no longer directly involved in the project. The shift to the new division enabled me to take a step back and view the module evaluation process from a different perspective. This perspective provided an extra dimension to my understanding of the UFS module evaluation system and was useful when I reached the point in the study where I was analysing and integrating the findings to answer the research questions.

My understanding of the module evaluation experience of students (identified as a primary stakeholder group in this study) was also deepened by my own experience as an undergraduate student at the UFS. During my undergraduate studies I often completed module evaluations and the module evaluation experiences of the students in this study (see section 7.3 of Chapter 7) resonated with me. It also enabled me to understand and empathise with the students in this study. On the other hand I have never had the experience of lecturing. As such, I found the experience of interviewing the lecturers enlightening. It allowed me to see their point of view and it answered many questions I had about module evaluation as a student. It gave me insight into the relationship between students and

lecturers and it proved to me the importance of understanding the experiences of all stakeholders involved in the module evaluation process in order to truly improve the current system.

My experiences and worldview thus shaped this study. This is a part of what action research is, but for my role as the researcher to contribute to the value of the study it is important to be aware of and acknowledge the influences that my personal experiences and worldview had on the research.

8.4 Conclusion

In this chapter I first positioned module evaluations at the UFS, as a system by identifying the boundaries of the system, of which the most notable is the processes and the procedures that govern the module evaluation process. I also identified the module evaluation system's production, supportive, maintenance, adaptive, and managerial subsystems. The focus of this chapter, however, was on describing the dynamics of the module evaluation system through the analysis and integration of the qualitative and quantitative findings of this study with systems thinking principles discussed in Chapter 4.

One of the aspects that this analysis highlights, is that while it might be tempting to regard module evaluations as a relatively technical institutional research process, the success or failure thereof rests to a large extent on relationships. The relationships between the primary stakeholders are pivotal in the success of the module evaluation system. If lecturers distrust students they are unlikely to optimally use module evaluation results (a product of the system) and if students are unsure of the need for them to complete module evaluations, they are less likely to take the process seriously. Furthermore, the relationships between the subsystems of the module evaluation system is crucial if the system is to function optimally. Thus, while it is important to test and further develop the module evaluation instrument, compare response rates and analyse overall results, these tasks will be compromised if institutional attention is not directed to the various relationships that have the potential to undermine, maintain or enhance the functioning of the system. In the next, and final,

chapter of this dissertation I will provide a conclusion by answering the research questions and reflecting on the value of the study.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

"Teaching appraisals are like a compass on a ship: without one, no one has a sense of direction – all hands are lost. A student's assessment of a teacher is always subjective, at times unfair, and possibly, stressful, but it is one of the few instruments to indicate if we are about to sail off the edge of the world or discover a new continent" (Ravelli, 2000, p.3).

9.1 Introduction

The quotation above, which was also presented at the start of the first chapter is now again presented at the end of this dissertation. In the preceding chapters many of the aspects highlighted in the quote appeared to ring true also of the UFS module evaluation system. It was noted, for example, that the use of module evaluation results should always consider the subjectivity of students' ratings and that module evaluations should preferably be used together with other sources of module feedback to understand student learning experiences. The vulnerability lecturers experience regarding module evaluations was highlighted in the qualitative findings of the research and presented in Chapter 7. Despite the subjective nature of feedback provided through module evaluations and the stress that it can cause lecturers in the process, module evaluations remain a useful tool, a compass, to gain insight into student learning experiences. This insight is essential if improvements to the quality of teaching and learning of an institution are to be made.

In this chapter, the research questions identified in section 1.3 of Chapter 1 are revisited, as a means of concluding the study. I reflect on the lessons learned from the research and provide recommendations that emanated from the process of answering the research questions. The limitations of the research and methodological reflections are also included in this chapter. The final conclusion

of the chapter includes a reflection on the value of the study as well as implications for future research.

9.2 Revisiting the research questions

In Chapter 1, it was noted that in order to answer the overarching research question, three sub-questions guided the study. In this section, I reflect on and answer each of these sub-questions. At the end of the section, the reflections of the three sub-questions are integrated to answer the overarching research question. Four objectives were set out in Chapter 1 (see section 1.3) to aid in answering the research questions. It is useful to list them again here as I reflect on them in the sections that follow:

1. Explore module evaluation experiences of lectures and students;
2. Review and enhance the institutional module evaluation instrument used at the UFS;
3. Make use of primary stakeholder empirical data and lessons learned from systems thinking to enhance the process of institutionalising module evaluations; and
4. Provide guidelines for the use of module evaluation results to improve the quality of teaching and learning

In the reflection of the three sub-questions, it is indicated which of the objectives were met in the process of answering the particular sub-question. Since the first research sub-question was answered in Chapter 7, and the third research sub-question answered in Chapter 8, this section has focused on answering the second sub-research question in greater detail together. This is done with a consolidation of the answers to the first and third research sub-questions as it was set out in Chapter 7 and 8.

9.2.1 Research sub-question 1

How do primary stakeholders (students and lecturers) experience module evaluations?

Qualitative data was gathered in the first two research phases of the action research study in order to understand the experiences of the primary stakeholders, which were initially defined as ‘students and

lecturers'. Therefore, in answering the first research sub-question, I set out to achieve the first objective of the study, namely, to explore the module evaluation experiences of lecturers and students.

It became clear during the first phase of the research that primary stakeholders of module evaluations should be more broadly defined to also include TLMs as they are the point of contact between faculties and DIRAP's module evaluations office. Thus, they play a crucial role in module evaluation procedures on a faculty-level. In addition, the TLMs are also responsible for using module evaluation results on aggregate levels (namely, at departmental and faculty levels). TLMs were therefore also included as primary stakeholders of institutional module evaluations and their experiences were additionally explored and reported on in Chapter 7 (see section 7.4).

This research sub-question was answered in Chapter 7, where the findings of the experiences of the primary stakeholders of module evaluations at the UFS were reported. In the following section, I will therefore only highlight the main findings presented in Chapter 7. This chapter was built on in order to answer the second research sub-question.

9.2.1.1 Lack of formal institutional module evaluation guidelines

A central concern that lecturers raised prior to the implementation of the institutional module evaluation pilot, was the lack of formal institutional guidelines for module evaluations at the UFS. The lack of formal procedure also resulted in some TLMs being involved with module evaluation procedures for the first time during the institutional module evaluation pilot. The need for formal institutional procedure that govern module evaluations at an institution is also confirmed by the literature which suggests that it is important that formal procedures are in place to reflect the purpose of module evaluations at an institution (Campbell & Bozeman, 2007; Gravestock & Gregor-Greenleaf, 2008).

The institutional pilot could addressed some of the procedural concerns which lecturers raised. As a result, the pilot was overall positively experienced by lecturers, compared to how they experienced module evaluations previously. There were now institutionalised procedures governing the process,

which eliminated some of the uncertainty that surrounded the process prior to the pilot. TLMs who were involved in module evaluation procedures in their faculties before the pilot (mostly TLMs in faculties with an established module evaluation culture) experienced the pilot positively as they now received assistance from a central unit (DIRAP's module evaluation office) which they did not previously receive.

9.2.1.2 Inconsistent use of module evaluation results

Lecturers used module evaluation results inconsistently across the institution. Some lecturers used it to make changes to their teaching practices, while some did not really use the results at all. Mostly, lecturers valued qualitative comments and many did not really use the quantitative module evaluation results. Module evaluation results were also not used consistently on departmental levels. Only a few lecturers could share examples of discussions taking place between themselves and the HoD regarding results. Such discussions typically took place when module evaluation results were poor. In addition, there were few incentives or rewards for receiving good results (apart from when module evaluations were considered as part of a portfolio when lecturers were up for a promotion).

TLMs acknowledged that ideally they would like to use the results more extensively. However, most TLMs did not support the use of module evaluations for promotion purposes.

9.2.1.3 Timing of module evaluations

The timing of the evaluations – usually at the end of a module – did not allow time for reflection on the feedback, implementation of changes or discussion with the group of students who had provided the feedback. A recommendation made by lecturers and students, was that module evaluations should take place earlier in a module. Rather, it should take place far enough into a module to have allowed students to experience all the aspects of a module which they need to evaluate (such as assessment), but not so far into the module that there is not time for lecturers to address issues that students raised.

The timing of module evaluations were also covered in the literature chapter (refer to section 2.6.2). McKimm (2008) cautions that the timing of module evaluations should be carefully considered as evaluating modules too late is likely to undermine students' interest in providing meaningful feedback.

9.2.1.4 Low response rates of online module evaluations

The majority of negative comments from lecturers concerning the institutional pilot were related to low response rates of the modules that were evaluated online. Lecturers had a slight preference toward paper-based module evaluations, mainly because paper-based evaluations yielded higher response rates. This is a claim that is also supported by the literature (Avery et al., 2006; Stowell et al., 2012) (see section 2.5.2).

The costs of printing, the slightly slower turnaround time, and the added labour required in terms of administering and collecting paper-based surveys cause TLMs to prefer online evaluations in terms of efficiency of the process. However, lower response rates associated with online evaluations leads to the majority of TLMs preferring to use hardcopy evaluations in their faculties as far as possible. Therefore, an increase in the number of hardcopy evaluations can be seen from the first phase of the study to the third phase of the study (see section 6.4).

9.2.1.5 Lack of feedback to students

Students' chief concerns with module evaluation procedures were a lack of feedback on the module evaluation results. This concern was explicitly implied by voicing their discontent with having to provide feedback but never receiving information on their input. On the whole, they were dissatisfied with the lack of a dialogue between themselves and their lecturers about the feedback they had taken time to provide. Students generally do not receive feedback due to the timing of evaluations (at the end of a module). The concern about a lack of feedback students receive on the module evaluation process in general, as well as the results, is also implicitly implied by students not being certain of how module evaluations are used and by not being certain that their inputs and views matter.

9.2.1.6 Students evaluating modules online in their free time

Some lecturers were concerned that, given that online evaluations were completed by students in their free time in an uncontrolled environment, that students who never or infrequently attended class would complete the evaluations and that it would lead to skewed results. The quantitative data (see section 6.3), however, showed that this was an unfounded concern, as the vast majority of students who completed module evaluation questionnaires attended "all", "most" or "some" of their classes with a negligible number of students indicating that they attended "none" or "few" of their classes.

Because students often had to complete online evaluations in their free time, many students also preferred the hardcopy method of evaluation. With the hardcopy method, students received time in class to complete evaluations and did not have to complete the evaluations in their free time. Many students, however, still preferred online evaluations and the proportion of students who prefer online evaluations may even increase if students are not required to complete online module evaluations in their own time.

From the discussion above, it becomes clear that the findings of the research led to a rather comprehensive understanding of not only *who* the primary stakeholders in the module evaluation system are, but also of their experiences. Therefore, it was possible to answer the first research sub-question by exploring the module evaluation experiences of the primary stakeholders in the module evaluation system (the first objective of this study). This was achieved by presenting their general module evaluation experiences and their experiences regarding module evaluation procedures. The next research sub-question is about *enhancing* module evaluation procedures by building on this understanding.

9.2.2 Research sub-question 2

How can knowledge of these (module evaluation) experiences be used to enhance module evaluation procedures?

As was noted earlier, research sub-question 2 has not yet been directly answered in the preceding chapters. Hence, greater attention is given to it in this section where findings of the research are integrated to answer it. Enhancement of module evaluation procedure is a crucial part of answering the overarching research question in that it provides ways in which module evaluations can *effectively* be institutionalised at the UFS. Enhancement of procedure is also an important outcome of any action research study, as the value of action research particularly lies within the enhancement of practices. The understanding that was gained through exploring the module evaluation experiences of primary stakeholders, provides a starting point for answering the second research sub-question. This is because it calls attention to concerns regarding module evaluation procedures which need to be enhanced. The research sub-question will be answered by referring back to the concerns related to module evaluation procedures highlighted in the previous section of this chapter and which can be summarised as:

1. Lack of formal institutional module evaluation guidelines/ procedures;
2. Inconsistent use of module evaluation results;
3. Timing of module evaluations;
4. Low response rates of online module evaluations;
5. Lack of feedback to students; and
6. Students evaluating modules online in their free time.

9.2.2.1 Addressing a lack of formal institutional evaluation guidelines/ procedures

The institutional module evaluation pilot was in itself an attempt to address the lack of formal institutional evaluation procedures. In the pilot, modules from all participating faculties were included and the number of modules was increased over each of the three phases of the pilot (from 183 in phase 1 to 231 in phase 3). This, meant that modules were evaluated in all these faculties which was a starting point for facilitating an institutional module evaluation culture. During the pilot, procedures were also developed for both online and paper-based module evaluations (see section 7.4 in Chapter 7 for a detailed overview of these procedures) which enabled the process to be conducted consistently across all faculties.

However, the biggest contribution of the pilot study in developing formal institutional module evaluation guidelines/ procedures was the development and refinement of the institutional module evaluation questionnaire that could be used for all modules, across departments and across faculties. Using an institutional module evaluation questionnaire also meant that the data gathered could be used on faculty and institutional levels. The adaptation of the questionnaire at the end of the first phase of the research was based on data gathered from staff and students. The questionnaire was adapted again based on data gathered from students in 16 interviews in the second phase of the study (see section 6.2 in Chapter 6 for a detailed overview of the process of adapting the instrument as well as reliability ratings of the instrument, and sections 7.3.2 and 7.3.3 for an analysis of data gathered from students regarding the instrument). The development and adaptation of an instrument that could be used institutionally was thus facilitated by understanding the primary stakeholder experiences of module evaluations (the answer to research sub-question 1). Through the adaptation of the instrument, the second objective of the study (to review and enhance the institutional module evaluation instrument used at the UFS), was achieved.

Despite the foundation that was laid for the development of formal institutional module evaluation procedures by the institutional module evaluation pilot, it is recommended that an institutional module evaluation policy is developed at the UFS. This policy should also address the five concerns related to module evaluation procedures that will be discussed next.

9.2.2.2 Addressing inconsistent use of module evaluation results

A second concern highlighted in the previous section relating to the need for the enhancement of module evaluation procedures at the UFS, was the inconsistent use of module evaluation results. Some lecturers used the results of module evaluations (mostly qualitative results), while others did not. There was rarely a discussion about the results between a lecturer and HoD, unless results were not very good. Results were used as part of a portfolio lecturers needed to submit when they were up for promotion in some faculties (but not all) and TLMs indicated that they used module evaluations to

get a bird's eye view of teaching and learning at the faculty. However, few TLMs provided concrete examples of how they had used module evaluation results extensively.

The fourth objective of this study was to *provide guidelines for the use of module evaluation results to improve the quality of teaching and learning.* Building on the understanding of the module evaluation experiences of students, lecturers, and TLMs that was gained by answering the first research sub-question, as well as, lessons from the literature reviewed in Chapter 3, a number of issues have been identified. These should be considered in the development of guidelines for the use of module evaluations and are listed below:

1. Lecturers should be assisted, perhaps through capacity building or staff development activities or through feedback from TLMs, in interpreting and addressing quantitative module evaluation results. At present, lecturers mainly use qualitative comments. Although the quantitative results are useful for analysing data on departmental, faculty or institutional levels, these results should also be utilised by individual lecturers. The value of the quantitative data should therefore not be lost to the individual lecturer.
2. Lecturers should, as far as possible, provide feedback to students on the module evaluation results. It may be the case that the module evaluation results do not require the lecturer to make any major changes, or it may be the case that it is not feasible for a lecturer to practically address what emerges from the module evaluation results. It is nonetheless important to close the feedback loop and for students to know that their inputs have been considered. Even if no actual changes are implemented based on the feedback from students, merely discussing the module evaluation results with students lets them know that their voices have been heard and that their feedback has been considered. This also addresses the concern of a lack of feedback provided to students that was raised by both students and lecturers.
3. HoDs should, together with lecturers, take ownership of the module evaluation process. It is preferable that discussions take place between a lecturer and HoD on module evaluation results. This should occur regardless of what the results look like, in order to establish a culture within departments for the consideration of module evaluation results and for valuing

student feedback. Consolidated results could also be discussed as a department. Such departmental discussions would allow individuals to compare their own results with results on a departmental level. Creating spaces for departmental level discussions about module evaluations could play an important part in building a culture of quality enhancement.

4. If module evaluation results are used for promotion of lecturers, there needs to be explicit and carefully formulated guidelines. For instance, such guidelines could specify that a minimum response rate needs to have been achieved before module evaluation results can be considered in promotion decisions. In addition, module evaluation results would always have to be used in conjunction with other sources of information (such as peer reviews) since students' voices only provide one perspective on quality of the modules and of the lecturer who is teaching the module.
5. TLMs should use module evaluation results on departmental and faculty levels to monitor results over time. They should identify specific modules where concerns are raised by students, and work with individual lecturers to promote the improvement of teaching and learning in such a module.

It is important that the subjective nature of module evaluations is acknowledged. They provide insight into the subjective experience of students on their learning. Their experiences may not necessarily be a reflection of the truth, but merely of their experience. If, for instance, module evaluation results indicate that a lecturer did not treat all students fairly (an item on the institutional module evaluation questionnaire), this does not necessarily mean that a lecturer is unfair. This feedback, however, should provide a platform for a lecturer to engage in dialogue with his/ her students to understand why he/she is perceived as treating students unfairly and to address any possible misconceptions. Acknowledging the subjectivity of module evaluations and by clearly stipulating the uses of module evaluations, the vulnerability lecturers feel toward module evaluations may be addressed.

9.2.2.3 Addressing the timing of module evaluations and lack of feedback to students

Module evaluations typically take place at the end of a module to provide students with enough time to experience all aspects of the module that need to be evaluated, including assessment. Conducting evaluation at the end of a module, however, prevents lecturers from addressing the results in time to benefit the group of students that provided the feedback. Consequently, many students are unsure of whether their feedback is considered at all, given that they do not receive any information on the results. Closing the feedback loop is important in letting students know that their feedback is considered and valued. It is therefore recommended that module evaluations take place early enough in a module. This would allow for lecturers to receive results, and still discuss them with the same group of students who participated in the evaluation.

By evaluating modules sooner, another concern highlighted by lecturers and students can thus be addressed namely, a lack of feedback to students on module evaluation results. As was mentioned in the previous section on using module evaluation results, feedback to students can take place by discussing the results with them in class even if their feedback cannot be addressed practically. Another way in which feedback can be provided to students is through making quantitative results available on aggregate levels – departmental or faculty level results. These results could be put up on notice boards or the learning management system so students can compare their own experience to the experience of other students in their faculty.

9.2.2.4 Addressing low response rates of online module evaluations and students evaluating modules online in their free time

One reason for low response rates of online module evaluations compared to paper evaluations, is possibly that students have to complete module evaluations in their free time. This was a major concern voiced by all stakeholders. Hence, procedures need to be put in place to allow students to evaluate a module online during class time. One way in which this can be achieved is through using mobile devices in class. This method is, however, dependent on Wi-Fi availability in the classroom

and on students owning mobile devices capable of evaluating modules online. More research in this area is needed to determine whether this is a feasible option[54].

In the section above, the second research sub-question was answered by first using primary stakeholder experiences to identify areas where enhancement of module evaluation procedures is required and then by making a number of recommendations to address each of these concerns. By answering the second research sub-question, the second and fourth objectives were achieved: *review and enhance the institutional module evaluation instrument used at the UFS* and to *provide guidelines for the use of module evaluation results to improve the quality of teaching and learning.* In the next section, the third and final research sub-question is addressed.

9.2.3 Research sub-question 3

How can systems thinking contribute to the process of effectively institutionalising module evaluations?

This research sub-question was the focus of Chapter 8 where the components of the system were applied to the module evaluation process. The dynamics between the components of the UFS module evaluation system were then analysed. In the following section, I build on Chapter 8 to highlight the contributions of systems thinking in the process of institutionalising module evaluations at the UFS, which can be summarised as follows:

1. Systems thinking leads to a more comprehensive understanding of module evaluations in general at the UFS; and
2. The complexity of the UFS module evaluation system is made visible through systems thinking.

[54] The e-learning division of the UFS is currently exploring the use of mobile devices in the teaching and learning environment. The findings of this research can also provide insight into the use of mobile devices for module evaluations.

9.2.3.1 A more comprehensive understanding of module evaluations in general at the UFS

The conceptualisation of module evaluations at the UFS as a system, has implications for how we think about, plan, implement and assess the institutional module evaluation process (system). It breaks down the various components that make up the module evaluation system ensuring that all aspects related to the module evaluation process are considered. The components that make up the UFS module evaluation system were discussed at length in section 8.2 of Chapter 8. In addition to understanding the various components of the system, the dynamics between these components (see section 8.3) were also considered thus ultimately leading to a more nuanced understanding of module evaluations at the UFS.

9.2.3.2 Making visible the complexity of the UFS module evaluation system

Systems thinking highlights the complexity of the UFS module evaluation system. Particularly the dynamics of the system components, add to this complexity. The dynamics between the components of the system were presented in detail in section 8.3, but it is worth summarising the key points here again.

Systems thinking highlights the inter-relatedness of the numerous subsystems making up the module evaluation system, some of which may not have been considered as part of the module evaluation process and so not taken into account in planning and implementation processes. This means that the implications of interventions to enhance the system need to take account of all subsystems likely to be affected, which adds to the complexity of planning for any intervention. As the system consists of many human components, the relationship between these components (subsystems) affects the functioning of the system. An awareness of the existence of the relationships between students and lecturers, lecturers and TLMs and so forth, and an understanding of these relationships also further add to an understanding of the complexity of the system. The system is, furthermore, a circular process and not a linear one. This means that there is no clear end to the process and that continuous efforts are required in the improvement of the process, not a singular event.

Having a grasp of the complexity of the UFS module evaluation system helps in the *effective* institutionalisation of the module evaluation system. Understanding the complexity means that the complexity can be explicitly considered in the planning and implementation of institutional processes, which in turn can ultimately lead to a more effective institutional system. In answering the third research sub-question, the third objective of the study *make use of primary stakeholder empirical data and lessons learned from systems thinking to enhance the process of institutionalising module evaluations* was achieved. In this way, applying systems thinking provided a means of avoiding a major challenge facing institutional research. This is a challenge recently highlighted in the US context by leading higher education and institutional researcher, Ernest Terenzini – "the current sense of urgency to do *something* to fix things, an urgency that is pushing [U.S.] higher education towards developing simple solutions for complex problems" (Terenzini, 2013, p. 145, emphasis in original). It is hoped that the analysis presented in this dissertation assists the UFS to approach institutional module evaluations as a complex and multifaceted system.

9.2.4 Overarching research question

In answering the three research sub-questions of this action research study, all four of the objectives that were formulated at the beginning of the study, were achieved. **Table 9.1** provides a summary of how each objective was met.

Table 9.1: Summary of how research objectives were achieved

Research objective	How the research objective were achieved	Chapters/ sections
Explore module evaluation experiences of lecturers and students	Gathered qualitative data from 25 lecturers, 76 students and 6 TLMs	Chapter 7
Review and enhance the institutional module evaluation instrument used at the UFS	Built on the understanding of primary stakeholders' module evaluation experiences of module evaluation procedures	Chapter 9 (section 9.2.2)
Make use of the primary stakeholder empirical data and lessons learned from systems thinking to enhance the process of institutionalising module evaluations	Analysed the experiences of the primary module evaluation stakeholders by using a systems thinking framework	Chapter 8
Provide guidelines for the use of module evaluation results to improve the quality of teaching and learning	Built on the understanding of primary stakeholders' module evaluation experiences of the use of module evaluation results, considering specifically the concerns raised regarding the use of module evaluation results	Chapter 9 (section 9.2.2)

By answering all three research sub-questions and by achieving the four objectives of the study, it is now possible to answer the overarching research question:

How can the UFS effectively institutionalise module evaluations as one mechanism for enhancing the quality of teaching and learning?

In order to answer this overarching research question, it was helpful to first understand how module evaluations were experienced by the primary stakeholders in the module evaluation process. Some concerns regarding module evaluation procedures were highlighted in the exploration of these experiences. The lack of formal institutional module evaluation procedures leads to confusion among staff regarding the module evaluation process at the UFS. Some lecturers are of the opinion that students do not take module evaluations seriously which leads to the validity of results of module evaluations being disputed by these lecturers. In turn, some students do not always take the module evaluation process seriously – thus confirming the beliefs of lecturers. This is because students are unsure of how their feedback is used and do not understand the purpose of module evaluations in general. Hence, the exploration of the primary stakeholder experiences of module evaluations highlighted the need for formal institutional module evaluation procedures and emphasised how an institutionalised module evaluation system would enhance the experiences of the primary module evaluation stakeholders. This policy development process should be facilitated through the quality enhancement work at the UFS so that the key purpose of module evaluations – that of enhancing teaching and learning – is central. The APDC should continue to oversee developments regarding the institutionalisation of module evaluation procedures as the committee provides a structure through which a complex system like this can be managed and given strategic direction.

In addition to this exploration of experiences leading to an understanding for *why* institutionalisation of module evaluations is necessary, it also provided a basis for understanding *where* and *what kind of* enhancement in procedures are necessary in order to *effectively* institutionalise module evaluations. The effective institutionalisation of module evaluations will require addressing a number of concerns

regarding module evaluation procedures. Most pertinent is the need for a formal module evaluation policy that is debated and agreed to by all stakeholders. As already noted, such a policy would need to include at least the following:

- An explanation of the purpose of module evaluations;
- Conceptualisation of module evaluations as an institutional system;
- Procedures for online and hardcopy module evaluations;
- Timing of module evaluations at the UFS;
- Guidelines for the use of module evaluations at the UFS; and
- Feedback to students on module evaluation results.

Finally, this study has shown that understanding and applying systems thinking principles could further assist in institutionalising module evaluations at the UFS. Systems thinking contributed to a more nuanced understanding of module evaluations as a system. Through creating an awareness and comprehension of the complexity of the system, the planning for and implementation of institutionalised module evaluation practices could be enhanced.

9.3 Methodological reflections

It is important to reflect on the methodology of the research to provide insight into the strengths and limitations of the study. In this section, I have reflected on the methodological strengths and weaknesses of the study.

9.3.1 Methodological strengths

The paradigmatic positioning of the study, and the action research design, enabled me to put the research question at the centre of the research, focusing my efforts throughout the study on answering the research question. A pragmatic approach allowed me to make use of the best possible combination of data collection methods to answer the question, and I was not constrained by rigid or prescriptive methods or epistemological assumptions. This approach was productive and enabled me, with detailed

input and involvement of the primary module evaluation stakeholders, to answer the research questions and achieve the research objectives.

The parallel mixed methods design (see section 5.3) enabled me to fully explore the experiences of the primary stakeholders in the module evaluation process through the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data. Although I focused primarily on the richness of the qualitative data, the quantitative data provided an essential dimension for contextualising the qualitative findings. It created an understanding of the stakeholder experiences, and so allowed for methodological triangulation. The mixed methods design worked well in providing a structure for the collection and analyses of the data which was needed in dealing with the vast amount of data that was collected as part of this study.

The action research approach followed served the purpose of the study which was ultimately about enhancing institutionalised module evaluation procedures. The three action research phases, within which data was collected and built on in each phase, added to the depth of the study, as well as the practical application thereof. The phased approach, characteristic of action research, also helped in conducting the research in a more manageable, structured and organised manner.

The qualitative and quantitative data collection methods were fit for the purpose of exploring stakeholder experiences. Although, as explained below, the amount of data was difficult to manage and analyse, it did provide a comprehensive understanding of stakeholder experiences. The interviews with lecturers worked particularly well because this provided a space in which the lecturers could openly and freely voice their concerns, confidentially, to a researcher who had a deep understanding of the process. This allowed for the acknowledgement of the feeling of vulnerability some lecturers experience when it comes to module evaluations. This was an important finding for gaining insight into the lecturer experience of module evaluations. It is unlikely that this issue would have been so openly expressed had I made use of a different method to engage with the lecturers such as focus groups for example.

9.3.2 Methodological weaknesses

Despite the strengths of the study discussed above, the study also had limitations. In this section, I reflect on three methodological weaknesses of this action research study. The first of these is the difficulty in managing and analysing the vast amount of data collected over the three phases of the research. Arguably, a smaller, more in-depth set of data may have allowed a deeper understanding of stakeholder experiences and motivations with respect to module evaluations. This potential limitation notwithstanding, understanding the breadth of the experiences was central to the purpose of the research which sought to understand the *system* of module evaluations. Nonetheless, this limitation points to opportunities for further research into the depth of the experiences of each of the stakeholder groups, in particular regarding the use of module evaluation results.

Another methodological limitation, was that the data that was collected in the second part of the first round of student focus groups did not provide the intended insight into students' understanding of the institutional module evaluation items. Although the first part of the focus groups equipped me with an understanding of student experiences of module evaluations, I could not productively use the data collected in the second part of the focus groups to really comprehend how well students understood individual items on the module evaluation instrument (see section 7.2 for further explanation of this challenge). This required that additional data be collected from students in the second phase of the research (through interviews) to gain more insight into how well students understand the module evaluation items. This was enabled by the flexibility of the action research approach to the study. The limitation could thus be addressed, but it was a time-consuming process to recruit participants and conduct an additional round of data collection with student stakeholders.

A final methodological weakness that needs to be mentioned is the adaptation of the module evaluation instrument, to take account of feedback from multiple stakeholders. This then resulted in differing response scales within the Teaching and Learning scale of the questionnaire for three items. As was discussed in section 6.2, this limitation was addressed in this study by dividing the scale into comparable subscales for the calculation of the reliability of the questionnaire. It is important to look

at the response scales in future adaptations of the instrument, and it is preferable that response scales are consistent within the questionnaire.

9.4 Value of the study and implications for future research

This study has provided a useful framework for the institutionalisation of module evaluations at the UFS. It highlighted the various dimensions that the institution needs to focus on in its endeavours to institutionalise module evaluations. Furthermore, it provided a comprehensive understanding of how the UFS' module evaluation system is experienced by its stakeholders. This makes a contribution not only to the practicality of module evaluations at the UFS, but also to the broader literature on module evaluations because relatively little is known about stakeholder experiences and what this means for how module evaluations are conducted. Another contribution to the broader literature, was the application of systems thinking in the higher education context. In the higher education context a theoretical framework as was shown in Chapter 4 has not been used to its full potential. As such, this study has provided an approach that could be usefully applied in other areas of higher education research as well.

The study has also opened the door to new research ideas that I would like to explore upon the completion of this dissertation. As was already mentioned in the previous section, this study provided a foundation for further research. This applies especially to research into the depth of the experiences of the module evaluation stakeholders, what happens when module evaluation results are used in different ways, and the implications that this has for module evaluation processes and the broader agenda of quality enhancement. Research into when data reaches a saturation point to determine adequate response rates, specifically in the context of the UFS, would also be beneficial.

In addition, a useful contribution would be further research into improving response rates. This proved an important concern among lecturers and TLMs in this study as well as in the literature, especially with regards to the online module evaluation method. This would be beneficial not only to the UFS, but to module evaluation in the South African context as well. The South African context

provides particular challenges in the use of online evaluations, such as large classes and lack of infrastructure at many universities.

9.5 Conclusion

In the preceding sections of this chapter, a revisiting of each of the three research sub-questions took place, by answering and reflecting on these questions. By answering the first sub-question a more comprehensive understanding of module evaluation experiences of lecturers, students and TLMs, as the primary module evaluation stakeholders at the UFS, was gained. Building on this understanding, I was able to answer the second sub-question. This was achieved by explaining how stakeholder experiences could assist in enhancing module evaluation procedures. In this section, several recommendations were made for the enhancement of module evaluation procedures at the UFS. An explanation of the way in which systems thinking contributes to institutionalising module evaluations at the university answered the third and final, sub-question. The answers to all three research sub-questions were integrated and consolidated to answer the overarching research question of this study. The final sections of this chapter included a methodological reflection on the strengths and weaknesses of the study, a reflection on the value of the research and implications for future research.

Final thoughts

This study has highlighted the importance of an effective institutional module evaluation system at the UFS to serve both a larger purpose in promoting the enhancement of teaching and learning, but also to enhance the experiences of the people that are most directly affected by module evaluations: the students, lecturers and TLMs. Essentially, effectively institutionalising module evaluations at the UFS requires that a sufficient number of students provide quality feedback on their learning experiences, that lecturers consider and effectively address the feedback, and that TLMs use the feedback on a faculty-level to enhance teaching and learning. It is both as simple and as difficult as that. I end off with a quotation from Mark Zusak's novel, 'The Book Thief", which very aptly describes my final thoughts upon completing this dissertation:

"I have hated the words and I have loved them, and I hope I have made them right"(Zusak, 2005, p.528).

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Appendices

Appendix A: Institutional module evaluation instrument used in the first semester of 2013 (Phase 1 of the research).

Appendix B: Institutional module evaluation instrument used in the second semester of 2013 (Phase 2 of the research).

Appendix C: Institutional module evaluation instrument used in 2014 (Phase 3 of the research).

Appendix D: Ethical clearance letter

Appendix E: Declaration from the language editor of this dissertation

Appendix F: Average module evaluation ratings per faculty per research phase

Appendix G: Interview schedule of lecturer interviews

Appendix H: General student focus group questions (part 1 of the focus group)

Appendix I: Questions for part 2 of student focus groups

Appendix J: Interview schedule of student interviews

Appendix K: Interview schedule of TLM interviews