ACCREDITATION BY PROFESSIONAL BODIES IN SOUTH AFRICA: PERCEPTIONS OF UNIVERSITY ACADEMICS

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PURPOSE: "... there is a perception that an intensifying influence is exerted on universities by professional bodies focused on disciplines affiliated with the South African construction industry. This has resulted in a concern that the nature and extent of involvement of some professional bodies amounts to undue interference, with possible consequences for academic freedom."

ABSTRACT

Purpose:
Professional bodies have vital roles to fulfil in relation to the regulation and enhancement of concerned professions. Among other reasons, academic programmes are subjected to the accreditation process to ensure that such programmes are of acceptable quality in the higher education system. However, there is a perception that an intensifying influence is exerted on universities by professional bodies focused on disciplines affiliated with the South African construction industry. This has resulted in a concern that the nature and extent of involvement of some professional bodies amounts to undue interference, with possible consequences for academic freedom.

Methodology:
To address this concern, an exploratory survey, which generated numerical and textual data, was conducted among academics that are affiliated with three major statutory professional bodies in terms of academic programme accreditations in South Africa. The study examines the relationship between accreditation visits by professional bodies, and academic freedom, to pinpoint possible tensions in the built environment sector.

Results:
The study shows that there is indeed a strong relationship between academic freedom and accreditation processes, and that the academics that took part in the study perceive that while incremental improvements in quality can be attributed to accreditation exercises, the option to review panel selection criteria, workload requirements, and the prescriptive nature of the process should be revisited.

Value:
The thought-provoking perceptions of the academics back the notion that academic freedom as a tenet that benefits society should be safeguarded from unintended influences.

Keywords:
academic freedom, accreditation, academics, tertiary education, South Africa

BACKGROUND

One of the central concepts in the definition of a university is that of academic freedom. Academic freedom is generally understood to mean "the right of a university to determine for itself, on academic grounds, who may teach, what may be taught, how it shall be taught, and who may be admitted to study" at that university[1]. There is a perception among university leaders that in the past few years there has been an increasing influence exerted on universities by some professional bodies in determining what can be taught and by whom. This has resulted in a concern among university leaders and academics that the nature and extent of involvement of some professional bodies in academic programmes amounts to undue interference, with possible serious costs for the academic freedom of universities.

While the proximate intent of the study is to propose mechanisms that will ensure harmonious relations between the needs of accreditation visits and requirements of professional bodies and the need to protect academic freedom at universities in South Africa, this particular paper is intended to highlight the perceived tensions in this relationship. The paper reports on the results obtained from an empirical study conducted among senior academic leaders in engineering and built environment faculties at universities in South Africa. It focuses on their experiences of the accreditation process in the built environment and engineering professions. The paper begins

with a review of related literature, which presents a synopsis of the discourse surrounding academic freedom, and the roles of professional bodies in higher education. The methodological approach employed in the study is then explained, followed by a presentation of the findings, which include both numerical and textual data. The positive aspects of the accreditation process, areas of concern, and suggestions for improvement are discussed in the sections on the findings and the broad implications of the study, respectively. The exposition of the implications of the study shows that areas of concern need to be addressed, and the concluding section of the paper motivate for further studies.

A REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

An exposition of academic freedom as a concept

Chetty[2] contends that universities that will stand tall among universities in South Africa will be those universities that have taken the goals of transformation seriously, that have effected change by democratic means, and that have worked tirelessly to protect the intellectual freedoms that are at the very basis of the university. In a TB Davie Memorial Academic Freedom Lecture titled "Universities in a time of change", Chetty [2] concluded that academic freedom is on the decline in universities in South Africa, and that, as such, it is up to academics to, at the very least, keep the idea of academic freedom alive, so that when society finally wakes up to the importance of having an independent, critical, and credible academy, let it not be that the country will look around and not be able to find what can be called a university.

Nelson[3] suggests that contingency, authoritarian administration, abuses of the national state of security, administrative restrictions on the use of communication technology, unwarranted research oversight, neoliberal assaults on academic disciplines, managerial ideology, circumvention of shared governance, globalisation, opposition to human rights, inadequate grievance procedures, religious intolerance, political intolerance, legal threats, and claims of financial crisis, impact upon academic freedom at universities. Of these issues, neoliberal assaults on academic disciplines provide a platform that corporate organisations and professional bodies can use to interfere in academic freedom. Internationally, the debate about academic freedom has found resonance in the United Kingdom (UK). Focusing more precisely on the institutional level, it is clear that the freedom to determine curriculum content and degree standards and to allocate funds is neither universal nor firmly established[4]. Academic freedom is said to be becoming increasingly "conditional" and subject to frequent negotiation, since key aspects of the governance of higher education and research are delegated to "non-departmental public bodies" that are not limited to funding councils, agencies of government, and professional bodies[4]. In other words, being an academic, or being able to pursue intellectual undertakings without fear from any quarters, is fast becoming a mirage. To this end, the principal focus of this paper is the notion that professional bodies tend to exert undue influence on universities in South Africa, particularly through the programme accreditation process.

The roles of professional bodies in university education

Although professionalization is defined and interpreted in different ways, most writers agree that it can be seen as the collective demarcation and institutionalisation of occupational practices, acknowledged but not controlled by outsiders[5]. When cultural and political perspectives are applied, professionalization is often seen as a matter of socio-political construction[6]. Thus, group membership, occupational definitions and standards, legitimacy, and status must be recognised in every profession[5]. In order to organise professional fields, associations will have to rely on certain mechanisms for structuring work, legitimating occupational spaces, and regulating practices[5]. Such mechanisms include, among others, "cognitive mechanisms", in the form of schooling, education, training, knowledge, skills, conferences, books, journals, and magazines[7]. The mechanisms would enable professions to define work practices, demarcate occupational fields, regulate behaviours, symbolise professionalism, and provide external cues[5]. The aforementioned definition and explanations set the tone for the roles that professional bodies play in higher education institutions, because a significant component of professional educational processes occurs within the walls of academia, particularly in the case of undergraduate educational programmes[5].

One of these roles is the role related to academic programme accreditation. The role of statutory bodies for professions in South Africa is influenced by the ability of the industry to adapt to changes in the spheres of technology and society[8](Council for the Built Environment (CBE), 2007). The CBE further noted that built environment professionals need to adopt a new approach to the use of materials and energy use, and they generally need to integrate environmental outcomes in project design and management. It was emphasised that the role of built environment professionals goes well beyond the promotion of economic growth. Architects, landscape architects, and engineers have an important role to play in shaping the form that cities take, and, for instance, the access of households to employment opportunities. Hence, since "business as usual" in the built environment disciplines and their related services may not be able to address community needs, it is important that one reconsiders the services provided, the quantum of services delivered, and the extent to which these support existing community-based service delivery and management systems.

METHODOLOGY

The literature that was reviewed informed the formulation of a working hypothesis for the study. The working hypothesis states that "there is a relationship between programme accreditation by statutory councils (referred to as professional bodies in this article) and academic freedom in the engineering and built environment sectors in South Africa". To operationalize the hypothesis, an exploratory survey was conducted among engineering and built environment academics in the first quarter of 2014. Purposive sampling was utilised for the study as random sampling would negate an attempt to survey academic staff members that are exposed to accreditation processes in their respective universities. Thus, academic staff members from universities constitute the sample for the study. Through postal mail and electronic mail, senior academic staff members were invited to participate in the study. The survey was allowed to run for approximately 10 weeks. The study recorded responses from 43 engineering-affiliated academics, 18 quantity surveying-affiliated academics, and 15 construction and project management-affiliated academics. A total of 68 academics from 14 universities took part in the study.

Data analysis and presentation

The questionnaire that was used to elicit the perceptions of the academic staff members introduced the purpose of the study on the first page and assured confidentiality with respect to the opinions of the respondents. To ensure confidentiality of the survey, limited background questions were asked. In other words, background questions enabled the identification of each questionnaire in terms of institutional and professional affiliations. The main questions in the survey instrument were asked with closed-ended and open-ended questions. The closed-ended questions were Likert-type questions, which elicited responses on a scale of 1 to 5. Given that the questionnaire made provision for both numerical and textual data, the analysis was done in

ine with the conventions related to descriptive data analysis. The textual analysis of the open-ended questions was done with the use of Atlas.ti, so as to identify dominant themes from the narratives given by the respondents. The descriptive statistics for the numerical data were computed using mean score (MS), average inter-item correlation, and Cronbach's alpha internal reliability test for each Likert scale-type question. The description allows the exploration and summarisation of patterns in the analysed data, so as to measure and understand variability in the responses. The MS enabled ranking of the responses, and whenever an MS tie occured among the variables of a question, the standard deviation rule was used to determine the ranking order. The MS ranking shows the perceived importance of each variable in the context of the observations.

For further explanations related to the descriptive statistical tools that were used, refer to statistics texts, such as[9]. In brief, the Spearman rank order was used to test the nature and extent of association between variables. The correlation coefficient ranged from -1 to +1, with 0 signifying perfect independence. The interpretation of the correlation coefficient corresponds to the strength assessment shown in Salkind[10]. The assessment includes the levels "absent" (.0–.2), "weak" (.2–.4), "moderate" (.4–.6), "strong" (.6–.8), and "very strong" (.8–1.0). The variables used for each Likert-scale question can be deemed to have positive directional correlation. The correlations, which reflect the strength of the association of variables in Tables 2–6, indicate the amount of variability that is shared within the variables. Furthermore, the literature shows that >.9 (excellent), >.8 (good), >.7 (acceptable), >.6 (questionable), and >.5 (poor) are used for interpreting Cronbach's alpha coefficients, which range from 0.0 to 1.0[11]. The descriptive nature of the data necessitates the use of a hierarchy, which is considered appropriate for presenting ordinal data, that is, Likert scale-type responses. The measurement scale used for the presentation is shown in Table 1. Thus, each table that has been used to present the numerical data in the following section shows MS, correlations, alpha if deleted, and rank related to each variable, as well as the average inter-item correlation and Cronbach's alpha for each question. "Average inter-item correlation" refers to whether a rating scale is consistent across users. This statistic is the raters' percentage of agreement, and/or how often the raters disagree. The lowest Cronbach's alpha coefficient recorded in the study is greater than 0.80. This observation shows that the Cronbach's alphas in the study are between good and excellent, and, as such, the MSes of the Likert-scale questions can be combined into a single mean, with either a good or an excellent internal reliability.

Table 1: Interpretation of Likert-scale measurement

Scale	Interpretation
5.00	Always / extensive / major / highly satisfied / very important / very positive / major impact
4.00	Often / above average / near major / more satisfied / more important / more positive
3.00	Sometimes / average / some / satisfied / important / positive
2.00	Rarely / below average / near minor / near satisfied / not important / negative
1.00	Never / limited / minor / not satisfied / not very important / very negative

Table 2: Correlations between certain views and descriptions of academic freedom for an idealised community of scholars in a university.

View	MS	Corr	Alpha	Rank
Freedom to discover and promote new ideas	4.18	0.60	0.80	1
Freedom to do research in an unconstrained area	3.99	0.65	0.79	2
Freedom to explore any area of scholarship	3.92	0.69	0.77	3
Prevention of interference with teaching and learning	3.33	0.59	0.80	4
Freedom to teach in any area without constraint	3.16	0.60	0.80	5
Average inter-item correlation	0.50			
Cronbach's alpha	0.83			

Table 3 suggests that the respondents perceived that the need for academic freedom within the community of scholars is justified by the discovery of new knowledge which will benefit society. On average, the respondents also perceived that the need for academic freedom was justified by the propagation of new knowledge, the pursuit of truth, a noble appeal to a higher societal value, and the protection of new knowledge.

These MSs support the idea that academic freedom within the community of scholars should contribute to the generation and proliferation of knowledge, which will benefit the society. The average inter-item correlation coefficient of 0.57 indicates that 57% of the raters were in agreement, the Cronbach's alpha of 0.83 indicates a good internal reliability, and the correlations can be seen to be strong.

Table 3: Justifications for academic freedom in a university, and their correlations with benefits to society

Justification	MS	Corr	Alpha	Rank
Discovery of new knowledge	4.24	0.73	0.82	1
Propagation of new knowledge	3.96	0.79	0.80	2
Pursuit of truth	3.92	0.71	0.81	3
Appeal to a higher societal value	3.84	0.57	0.85	4
Protection of new knowledge	3.67	0.62	0.84	5
Average inter-item correlation	0.57			
Cronbach's alpha	0.83			

On a scale of 1 (minor) to 5 (major), the respondents in the survey were requested to rate the extent to which they perceive certain accreditation-related activities affect the protection of academic freedom. As shown in Table 4, only four activities were perceived to have marginal effects on academic freedom when professional bodies embark on accreditation visits to various institutions. Inspection of documents and facilities, scrutiny of performance indicators, specially constituted panels, and document analysis constitute the areas where some effects on academic freedom were perceived to occur.

In Table 4, the average inter-item correlation coefficient of 0.55 shows that 55% of the raters were in agreement, the Cronbach's alpha of 0.89 indicates a good internal reliability, and the correlations can be seen to be strong.

Table 4: Correlations between the perceived effects of certain accreditation-related activities and the protection of academic freedom in universities in South Africa.

Activity	MS	Corr	Alpha	Rank
Inspection of documents and facilities	3.17	0.61	0.88	1
Scrutiny of performance indicators	3.13	0.69	0.87	2
Specially constituted panels	3.03	0.75	0.87	3
Document analysis	3.00	0.76	0.87	4
Peer visitations	2.92	0.70	0.87	5
Self-assessment	2.77	0.73	0.87	6
Direct observation of classroom teaching	2.58	0.57	0.89	7
Average inter-item correlation	0.55			
Cronbach's alpha	0.89			

Areas of accreditation "focus" that affect the protection of academic freedom in universities in South Africa include curriculum design and content, quality control and assurance processes, graduate abilities, graduate employability, and pedagogy (see Table 5). It is, however, notable that most of the respondents perceive that in the South African context, they are satisfied with academic freedom in the current setting of programme accreditation by professional bodies. As evident in Table 5, the average inter-item correlation coefficient of 0.55 indicates that 55% of the raters were in agreement, the Cronbach's alpha of 0.90 indicates an excellent internal reliability, and the correlations of the various different focus areas were strong.

Table 5: Areas of accreditation "focus" that affect the protection of academic freedom in universities in South Africa

Area	MS	Corr	Alpha	Rank
Curriculum design and content	3.59	0.59	0.89	1
Quality control and assurance processes	3.52	0.72	0.88	2
Graduate abilities	3.18	0.67	0.89	3
Graduate employability	3.12	0.57	0.90	4
Pedagogy – teaching, instruction, training, tutelage	3.11	0.65	0.89	5
Programme resources	2.91	0.74	0.88	6
Physical space, ICT, and library	2.89	0.79	0.88	7
Staffing in departments	2.79	0.75	0.88	8
Average inter-item correlation	0.55			
Cronbach's alpha	0.90			

Table 6 shows the perceptions of the respondents when they were asked to rate the extent of importance of certain aspects of academic freedom within the context of university mandates and contributions to society in South Africa. Based on the computed MSs, the respondents were of the opinion that the mentioned aspects are either important or more important. The respondents perceived that the freedom to teach research-informed topics, the avoidance of external pressures that could reorient universities, and the assurance of independence of scholarship are significant considerations for the protection of academic freedom. It was also found that the respondents opine that scholars should enjoy teaching freedom, while making the freedom to learn available to students in their institutions. Table 6 further shows that freedom to determine student standards, scholarship not constrained by external pressures, freedom related to course design and content, freedom from accountability to external pressures, and non-reorientation of curricula due to external pressures were all deemed to be important for continued academic freedom in universities. The average inter-item correlation coefficient of 0.37 suggests that only 37% of the raters were in agreement, while the Cronbach's alpha of 0.85 indicates a good internal reliability, and the correlations ranged from moderate to strong.

Although not tabulated, the respondents were generally neutral when asked how they had experienced the current setting of programme accreditation by statutory councils. The same perception was recorded for how effective the accreditation process had been in terms of enhancing the quality and relevance of academic programmes. While some of the respondents reported "no impact", the majority of respondents indicated some impact. In other words, the respondents were in agreement that a major impact has not been recorded in the South Africa when the effectiveness of accreditation programmes is correlated with the quality and relevance of academic programmes.

Table 6: Aspects of academic freedom perceived to be critical to the contributions of universities in South Africa

Aspect	MS	Corr	Alpha	Rank
Freedom to teach research-informed propositions	3.85	0.61	0.83	1
External pressures must not reorient universities	3.82	0.64	0.82	2
Independence of scholarship	3.81	0.48	0.84	3
Scholars, as with lecturers, should enjoy teaching freedom	3.77	0.53	0.83	4
Freedom to learn is given to students	3.71	0.51	0.84	5
External pressures should not reorient curricula	3.68	0.64	0.82	6
Freedom related to course design and content	3.66	0.56	0.83	7
Scholarship not constrained by external pressures	3.59	0.48	0.84	8
Freedom to determine student standards	3.58	0.51	0.84	9
Freedom from accountability to external pressures	3.43	0.53	0.84	10
Average inter-item correlation	0.37			
Cronbach's alpha	0.85			

RESULTS – OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

The open-ended questions that were asked allow the respondents to tap into their experiences and offer perspectives that were not forthcoming from the closed-ended questions. The questions elicited responses with regard to the positive and the negative aspects of the accreditation process that the respondents have witnessed, what should be done to improve the effectiveness of programme accreditation by professional bodies, the impact of accreditation methodology, and requirements for the protection of academic freedom in universities in South Africa.

With the use of Atlas.ti software coding and network tools, the major themes from the comments were identified. Use of the software was important, as the corpus of comments exceeded 22 pages when individual comments were consolidated into a single file. As shown in Figure 1, the majority of the respondents had negative perceptions with regard to documentation requirements for accreditation visits. Recurrent comments related to this theme show that some of the respondents are unhappy with the amount of time that staff members have to spend preparing the documents. The view that an inordinate amount of documentation, which is not always examined thoroughly, has to be compiled for each subject pertaining to a qualification worries academic staff members. This view is linked to the notion that accreditation generates too much paperwork, with the result that staff members at universities tend to waste too much valuable time on administration duties and the related additional work. The documentation has been described as cumbersome, burdensome, excessive, and time-consuming. It results in added workload for academics, inadequate attention to work, and limited time to conduct research. These views, and others not mentioned here, suggest that documentation requirements for programme accreditation should be addressed by statutory councils.

[1:87] Time in preparing each extensive documentation. 13 - Too cumbersome and at times unneccessary demands made	[1:81] The Inordinate amount of documentatio that needs to be produced for each module which is ultimately not looked at.

[1:92] Burden for ontime documentation preparation

[1:103] Too much of a paper work.

[1:97] Excessive documentation

[1:29] The processes are pre-occupying in terms of preparations to the point that academic work suffers

Huge documentation commitment

{13-0}

[1:79] Time Consuming - (Alot of paperwork) over and above the normal annual repaorts to be submitted.

[1:39] Too much valuable time now "wasted" on admin and files

[1: 78] Time consuming, Costly, Limited feedback and effective support.

[1: 76] Additional work for the University personnel.

[1: 69] The time absorbed in preparing documents that could better be spent on research.

[1: 116] Extra load put on lecturing staff. 13- Files, Documentation and interviews determine accreditation.
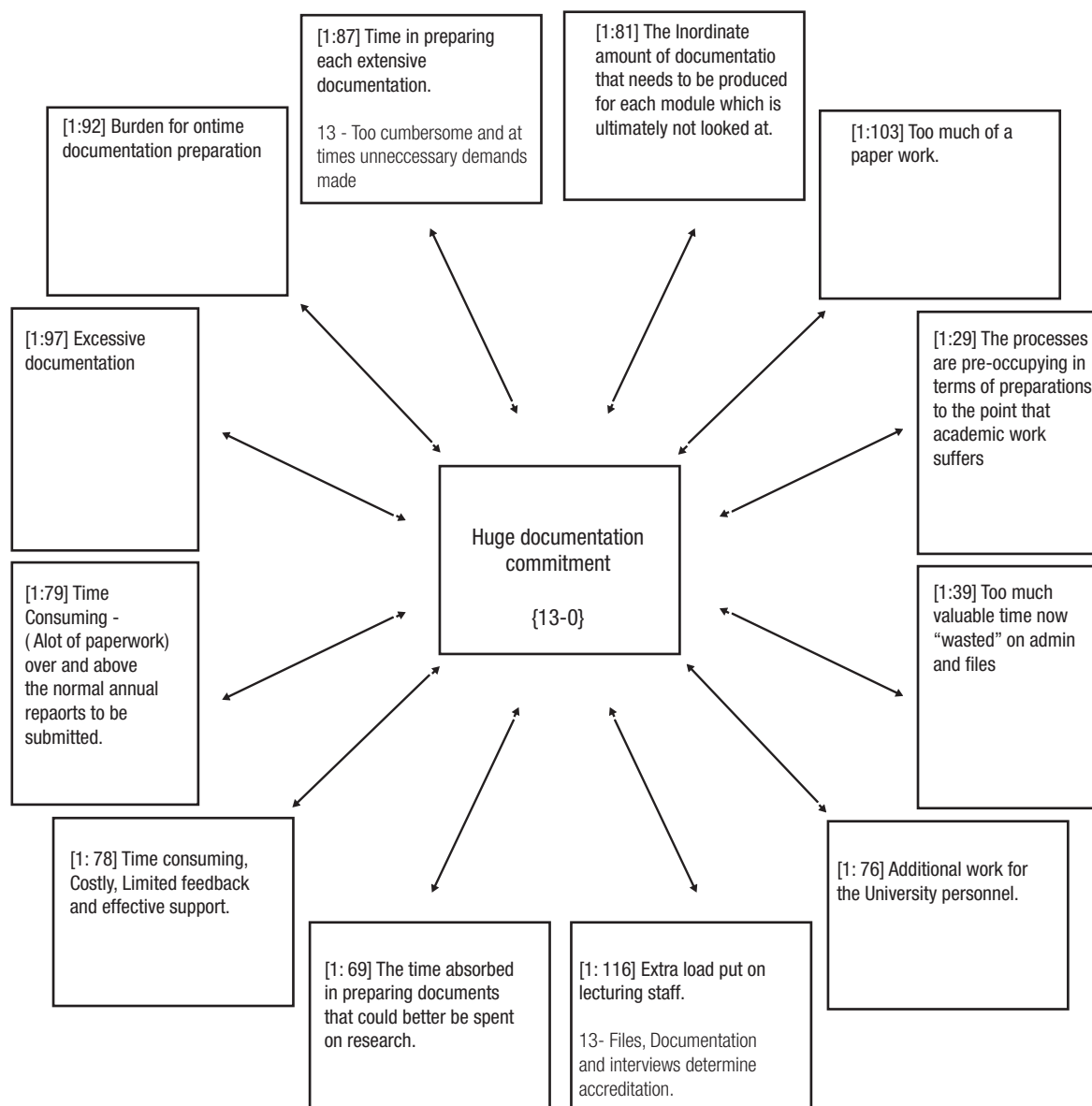
Figure 1: Perceptions related to documentation requirements for accreditation visits – for your attention

Another major theme that emerged from the analysis of the comments relates to the selection of accreditation panel members by professional bodies. The respondents emphasised the unintentional consequences of using a panel that is dominated by academics from other institutions. According to one respondent, such panels send the wrong signals, in various forms, and the view was expressed that accreditation that is purported to favour the industry should be led by professionals that are employed full-time in the industry. Figure 2 points to the negative impact that personal bias can introduce into the accreditation process. One respondent highlighted the perceived arrogance of some accreditation team members, who are often senior academics (either retired or active). Another respondent opined that the bias shown by some panel members gives the impression that some institutions are more favoured than others in programme accreditation exercises. The view that criticisms from academic panel members tend not to be developmental and tend to be subjective was also attributed by the respondents to bias, which could be agenda-driven. These perceptions, the accuracy of which is clearly debatable, could be a major reason why one respondent was of the view that the values of academic freedom have been negatively affected by individuals and personal agendas, and, as such, the value of this freedom have not been preserved in the current climate.
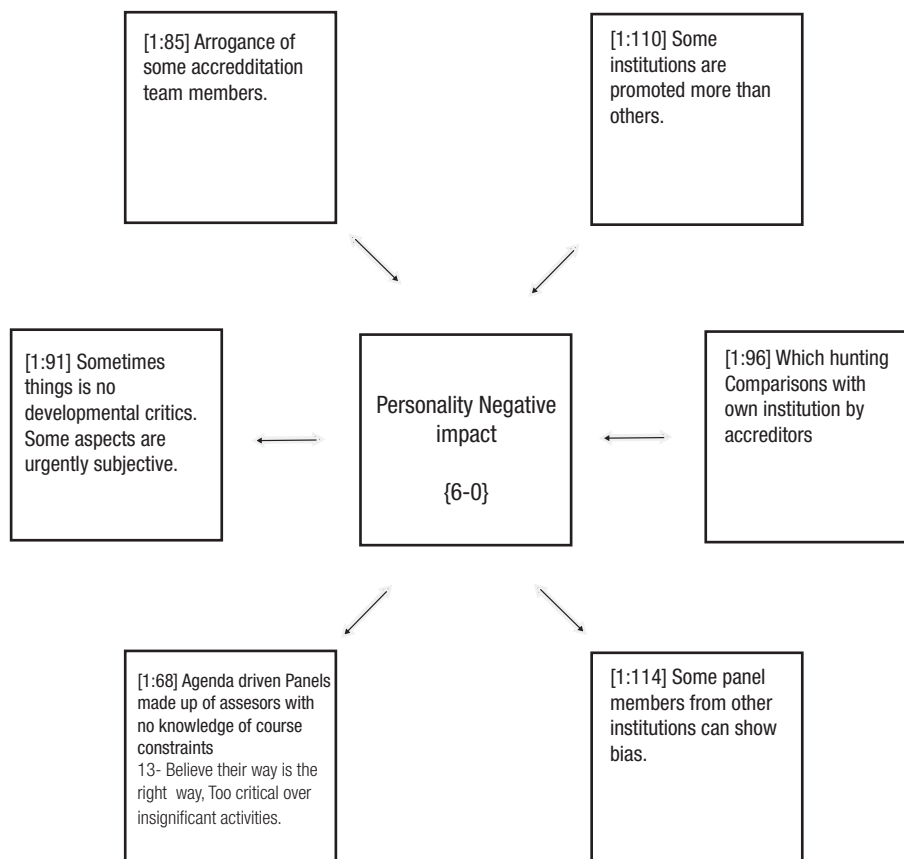
[1:85] Arrogance of some accredditation team members.

[1:110] Some institutions are promoted more than others.

[1:91] Sometimes things is no developmental critics. Some aspects are urgently subjective.

Personality Negative impact

{6-0}

[1:96] Which hunting Comparisons with own institution by accreditors

[1:68] Agenda driven Panels made up of assesors with no knowledge of course constraints
13- Believe their way is the right way, Too critical over insignificant activities.

[1:114] Some panel members from other institutions can show bias.

Figure 2: Perceived effects of limited industry professionals in accreditation panels – for your attention

However, despite the aforementioned criticisms, there appears to be consensus on the benefits of programme accreditation. The benefit that was cited the most was recognition, or prestige. Figure 3 illustrates the views in this regard. The respondents were of the opinion that recognition assists with the marketing of academic programmes, and it accords status to institutions. The status accorded to qualifications through professional accreditation would appear to justify investment of resources in the process.

The respondents were, however, ambivalent about the perceived non-standardisation of the accreditation process when different professional bodies are involved. Perceived lack of uniformity in required documentation, information, unit standards, and focus areas, incidental to accreditation activities were sources of concern for most of the respondents in this survey. One respondent opined that the rules of accreditation are rigid, and that this makes it difficult to apply the freedom to create new course contents in the curricula. If this is the case, the creation and dissemination of new knowledge, which could benefit the society would suffer. The case for uniformity was made stronger by one respondent who contended that accreditation visits are problematic in terms of unclear specifications, unnecessary and extremely burdensome administrative requirements, and the assumption that all that is important can be documented.

According to one respondent, who is affiliated to engineering programmes, when a deficiency has been found in a programme at the end of an accreditation visit, and there is a case for granting conditional accreditation to a programme, universities devise remedial action plans to satisfy the accreditation bodies. Such a situation leads to unintentional compromise of the academic freedom of the institution. For example, academic leaders are replaced, curriculum content is modified, and learning and teaching strategies are changed. The view that accreditation visits are very thorough and prescriptive shows that little academic freedom is made possible by the process. The issues that have been highlighted require reflection, deliberation, and dialogue among stakeholders within the higher education sector in South Africa.

Broad Implications Of The Findings
The assumption that drives academic freedom is that the society benefits when academics are able to search for truth without hindrance, they are able to report their findings regardless of what those findings may be, and they have the fundamental tenet to protect such freedom[12]. This assumption is supported by the time-tested practice in which academics are evaluated by peers, based on the quality of their ideas, rather than by administrators. To draw inferences, the findings of this exploratory study are principally discussed in the light of the implications of two studies[13,14].

The purpose of the work of Van Kemade and Hardjono[13] was to define what factors cause acceptance of and/or resistance to external evaluation systems, particularly accreditation, among academics in universities. The work shows that in the Netherlands, although accreditation is said to have an improvement function, the main function is accountability since it is backed by law. Non-conformance to accreditation standards can have the consequence of closure of the programme for new students in the Netherlands. The findings from the Netherlands indicate that resistance to accreditation is evident in the consequences of accreditation for the work of the academic (that is, increased workload), negative emotions (stress and insecurity), a lack of knowledge and experience (help from specialists is needed), and a lack of acceptance (another paradigm is needed)[13]. The Dutch study observes that accreditation is a contentious

issue, which clearly has negative effects on the workload of academics and creates much stress and insecurity. The study further contends that the lecturer seems to have lost control of the process, since quality experts are needed to help in the writing of the self-evaluation report and in the preparation of the site visit. Although the standard in the process has not limited the professional autonomy of the lecturer, accreditation is nevertheless unpopular among the sampled academics in the Netherlands. The influence of accreditation on the workload of lecturers and the trends with regard to control of the process has resonance with the findings that were presented in the previous section of this paper. In the Dutch case, the lecturers have help with regard to documentation, but in South Africa, this is not the case.
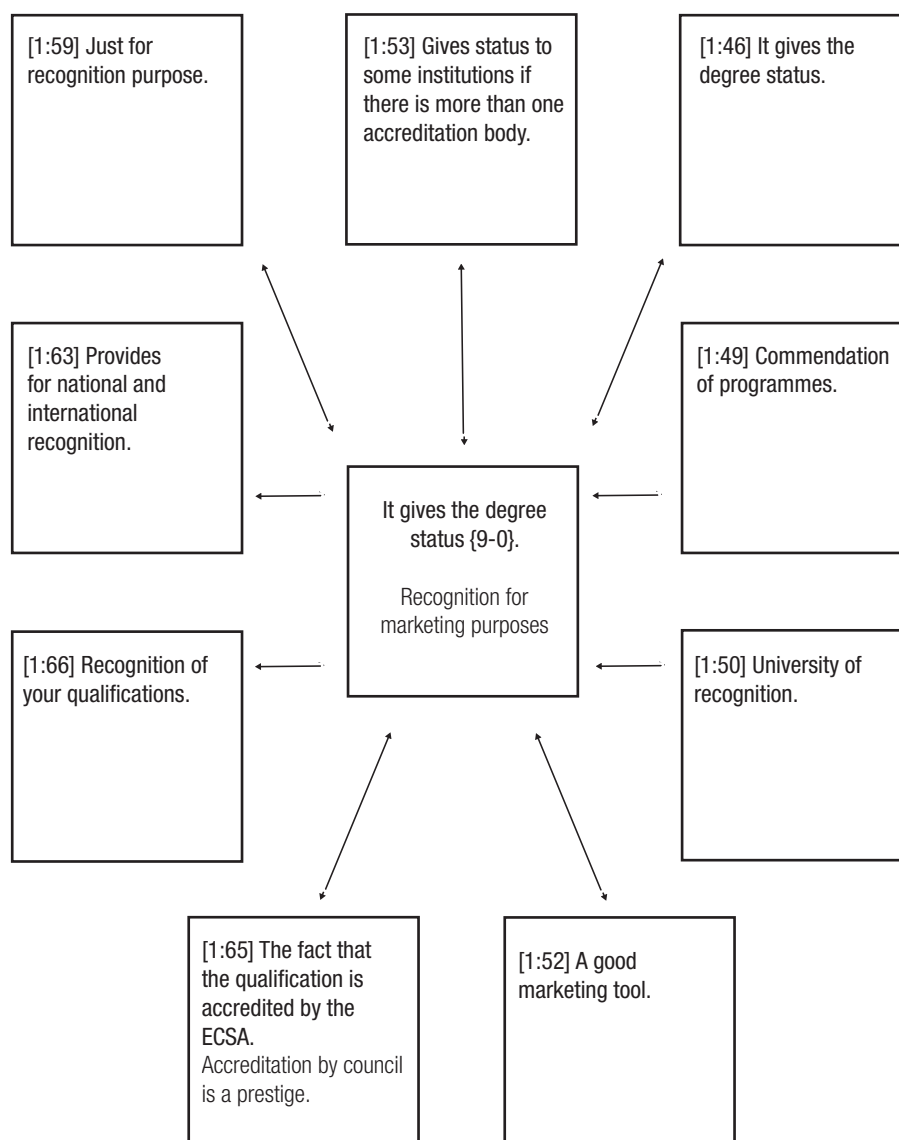
[1:59] Just for recognition purpose.

[1:53] Gives status to some institutions if there is more than one accreditation body.

[1:46] It gives the degree status.

[1:63] Provides for national and international recognition.

[1:49] Commendation of programmes.

It gives the degree status {9-0}.

Recognition for marketing purposes

[1:66] Recognition of your qualifications.

[1:50] University of recognition.

[1:65] The fact that the qualification is accredited by the ECSA.
Accreditation by council is a prestige.

[1:52] A good marketing tool.

Figure 3: Perceived significance of accredited programmes – for your attention

The study by Espinoza and Gonzalez[14], which relies on descriptive statistics and official data from Chile, shows lessons learned from the accreditation of programmes in higher education. The study contends that the accreditation system implemented in Chile has both positive and negative implications for programmes in higher education. In particular, the accreditation has provided more detailed information to users and has improved the effectiveness of training and the professional performance of graduates in Chile. However, there are challenges that should be addressed. For the system as a whole, Espinoza and Gonzalez[14] suggest that it is necessary to increase awareness that self-evaluation and accreditation are interventions with the long-term purpose of promoting continuous quality improvement at all levels. As a result, there should be free-flowing dialogue between the parties involved in the accreditation process, so that criteria and procedures are similar, coherent, and trustworthy for all stakeholders. The

authors further make a case for clear criteria for the selection of accreditation panel members, so as to guarantee transparency and equity for institutions and programmes that are being evaluated. According to a Canadian multiple-case study, accreditation could facilitate organisational learning, promote strategic alignment, reinvigorate the mission of an academic institution, emphasise performance management, and increase the focus on quality and/or research [15].

The broader implication for academics and statutory councils in South Africa is to see the accreditation process as a quality assurance undertaking that is improvement-driven, without rigidity, and perceived stress on lecturers. The accreditation of programmes should be seen to motivate students and academics and professionals in the industry alike. The accreditation process should undergo a paradigm shift from "prescriptive activities" to a "performance-based" approach. The performance-

based approach should be able to engender a developmental orientation in the process, and academics should be involved in the entire process.

CONCLUSIONS

Programme accreditation, which is important for construction management, quantity surveying and engineering disciplines, is conducted by various statutory councils in South Africa. The accreditation exercise is not at variance with what is obtainable outside South Africa, and it is perceived to have benefited the respective professions. The stated purpose of accreditation is to improve quality and promote continuous improvement in higher education. For instance, a respondent to the survey on which this paper is based contended that if it were not for accreditation requirements, some academics would have built "ivory towers", to the detriment of the practice of the professions concerned. There are, however, aspects of the accreditation exercise that have implications for the freedom to teach and research, which is the fundamental tenet of academic freedom. Academic freedom is supported by the need to explore and examine the truth in a particular context, for the benefit of society. This freedom has been the cornerstone of pedagogy and inquiry in higher education for a long time, at both the individual and the institutional level.

In general, across this study sample, there were slightly more questionable responses than positive responses when the tension between accreditation and academic freedom was examined. This was particularly evident in the responses made with regard to the selection of accreditation panels, the final outcome of accreditation visits, the documentation of accreditation requirements, and the evaluation methodology used. It should be noted that although most of the respondents perceived that accreditation should continue to contribute to incremental improvements in the programmes concerned, they nevertheless advocated for radical changes that should occur through dialogue and reflection on the current "modus operandi" of accreditation visits. The predominant themes, which could be addressed through dialogue, include the negative impact of perceived bias among accreditation panel members, the huge paperwork requirement, and the lack of uniformity in the process between councils and institutions.

Given the current accreditation mandate of statutory councils of professions in South Africa, and the relative paucity of empirical data on lessons learned, it would be helpful to further scrutinize the connection between academic freedom and programme accreditation in South African universities. A possible approach could be to build upon higher education accreditation models of academic programmes in the international context, current research on the resistance of academics to prescriptive accreditation models, and research on the protection of academic freedom in higher education. Through these anticipated future studies, the literature can extend in several new directions, particularly in the South African context. In addition to opportunities for future research, the findings of this exploratory study have implications for policy and practice, particularly for statutory councils and universities. For example, for university deans, heads of academic departments and professional council registrars, this research can inform how accreditation-related decisions are made.

NOTES:

1. Due to the methodological stance adopted in this study, limitations vis-à-vis the non-inclusion of the views of statutory councils, the findings of this study should be treated as inconclusive, thought-provoking, and insightful.

2. The names of specific councils in the discussion of the findings have been removed to ensure anonymity.

3. The grammar errors in the figures are acknowledged and they are due to the verbatim importation of the respondents' comments in the Atlas.ti software.

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