Abstract
This article focuses on unaccredited skills programmes at a community learning centre in Soshanguve, a township near Pretoria. We made use of the nominal group technique (NGT) as data collection instrument to enable us to identify initial aspects that obstruct the accreditation of skills programmes. These aspects are at the basis of an action research project. The sample comprised lecturers who offer skills programmes at the centre. Issues that prevent the accreditation of skills programmes that emerged from the NGT meeting are the quality management system, learning and teaching, the marketing strategy, work integrated learning and the placement of alumni in different jobs. These aspects will indicate the focus of the action research to be conducted.

Keywords: accreditation, action research, nominal group technique, skills programmes, systems thinking.

1 INTRODUCTION
The purpose of this paper is to indicate how, through the nominal group technique (NGT) as data collection instrument, elements to be focused on as part of a generative action research project (a term used by McNiff, 2001), were identified. “Action research should offer the capacity to deal with a number of problems at the same time by allowing spirals to develop spin-off spirals, just as in reality one problem will be symptomatic of many other underlying problems” (McNiff, 2001:43-44). The study that forms the basis of this paper had as focus the accreditation of skills programmes at a community learning centre (CLC) in Soshanguve, a township near Pretoria. However, before the centre can apply for accreditation, diverse aspects need to be addressed in order to comply with the requirements of the accreditation body, which in this case is the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QTCO, 2016:10).

Although the QCTO indicates the basic summative requirements for accreditation, the authors were of meaning that they also have to look at formative aspects that hinder the accreditation of skills programmes at the CLC years after its founding. This holistic approach was guided by systems thinking which has at its basis thinking about any given issue as a whole, emphasising interrelationships between components. (Richmond, 1993:261; Shaked & Schechter, 2013:772).

To collect the data at the initial stages to determine relevant issues that could guide our research, we made use of NGT. An advantage of NGT is that it creates focus within a group of action researchers (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011:5) in a structured way (Dang, 2015:14). The establishing of focus in the study was the first phase of a triangulated study, which explored the perceptions of lecturers about the current non-accreditation of skills programmes at a CLC.

In this paper, the authors indicate how NGT was used and describe the outcomes of the applied NGT process. These findings will serve as compass to direct the researchers concerning the further route to be followed in the research. The key question discussed during the NGT meeting, led by one of the authors was, “What are the current hindrances that prevent skills programmes at our CLC to be accredited?”

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Sample
The purposive sample selected for the NGT session consisted of eight lecturers employed at the Centre. The selection criterion to be selected as participants, was that they should have had
experience of lecturing in skills programmes at the institution for longer than three years to be able to share worthwhile perceptions about issues that obstruct accreditation.

2.2 Data collection

Data were collected during an NGT meeting that lasted for two hours.

Step 1: Developed and state the research question

In an invitation directed to the participants one week before the NGT meeting, we stated the question for discussion at the meeting. It was also stated at the beginning of the NGT meeting.

Step 2: Participants worked alone / silent generation

Participants work independently for 15 minutes, jotting down as many ideas, thoughts, or answers as possible relevant to the question (Cohen et al., 2011:57); one idea per index card (Dang, 2015:17). After fifteen minutes, he called “time”.

Step 3: Round robin / Sharing and recording of ideas

Participants shared their ideas orally as a word or a sentence in the group which were recorded by the leader on charts. Participants could revise an earlier contribution, or develop new ideas from their own list. No evaluation or discussion of ideas was allowed at this stage (Cohen et al., 2011:357).

Step 4: Discuss and clarify ideas

Individuals explained their suggested ideas, one by one; add to it if necessary, or to integrate it with another idea. No argumentation about the merits, validity, or worth of any idea was allowed at this point.

Step 5: Forming clusters (Cohen et al., 2011:357)

The five clusters that emerged from the discussions in random order were

Work integrated learning,
Marketing strategy,
Quality management system,
Placement of students for work and
Learning and teaching.

While participants took a refreshment break, the leader typed the random list of the identified aspects and printed eight copies; one for each participant

Step 6: Prioritising items based on the compiled list generated in Step 4 / Voting

After the break, each participant received a list of ideas raised, in random order, to rank them in order of priority by allocating a value of 1 to 5 to each item. The highest priority was indicated with 1, while 5 meant the lowest priority.

Step 6: Counting votes

The leader requested three participants to count the votes.

Step 7: Way forward

The leader and the participants discussed the implications of the results and the way forward, which brought closure to the Nominal Group Technique.

3 RESULTS

Table 1 represents the clustered outcomes of the NGT meeting. Under “ideas”, the main aspects that emerged from the meeting are indicated. The “cluster” column represents the crystallised ideas that emerged from the “ideas” column. The column “Votes” indicates the prioritising of the clustered item by the participants. Where an item was indicated as 1, 5 marks were allocated; 2 = 4, 3 = 3, 4 = 2 and 5 = 1. “Ranking” indicates the overall importance of an item.
### Table 1: Clusters that emerged from NGT discussions in order of priorities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ideas</th>
<th>Cluster</th>
<th>Votes</th>
<th>Ranking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| • Code of conduct  
• Hierarchical structure  
• Establishment of student support structure | Quality Management System (QMS) | 32 | 1 |
| • Lack of commitment from lecturers  
• Capacity building of lecturers  
• Curriculum  
• Resources | Learning and teaching | 31 | 2 |
| Assistance to find employment | Placement of graduates | 18 | 3 |
| • Marketing  
• Selection  
• Orientation | Marketing strategy | 15 | 4 |
| • Partnerships with possible employers  
• Integration of theory and practice  
• The duration of practical experience | Work Integrated Learning (WIL) | 14 | 5 |

NGT allowed us to identify aspects spiralling from the main focus, the non-accreditation of skills programmes. We discuss each of these aspects in the following paragraphs with its relevance to literature.

### 4 QUALITY MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

#### 4.1 Code of conduct

The role of an effective code of conduct in any institution for learning enables effective learning to take place in a safe, secure and positive environment. Such a disciplined environment refers to an environment that is free of disruptive behaviour. A code of conduct should address student behaviour that may affect education negatively and which may impact seriously the atmosphere conducive to learning and teaching in the classroom (Mestry & Khumalo, 2012:97). According to the Department of Education (2008:1), an institution for learning should be committed to provide an environment for the delivery of quality teaching and learning by promoting the rights and safety of all students, staff and parents.

Participants rose the lacking of a functional code of conduct during the NGT meeting as one of the aspects the Centre needs to attend to. It emerged that students are regularly absent from classes and from WIL venues without providing valid reasons for their absence. Their late coming for WIL and lectures shows signs of poor discipline. Their physical appearance in some cases and some students’ unwillingness to adhere to the prescribed dress code indicates that the professional conduct of students does not receive the necessary attention during their training. Participants suggested that the Centre should design policies to deal with students’ conduct.

#### 4.2 Hierarchical structure

Friend (2018) describes an organisational structure as a system that defines each job and each staff member’s function. It should also give an indication of which staff should report to in the organisation. Participants concluded that there is no clear hierarchal or organisational structure in the Centre, exacerbated by a lack of permanently employed managers at middle management level. Although there are no such posts available, the belief exists amongst participants that current programme coordinators could be more efficient if they are structured correctly in terms of reporting relations and if they are given clear job descriptions.
The absence of a hierarchical structure in the organisation leads to confusion about responsibilities and focus. It creates a situation where staff members do not know whom to report to and sectional heads do not take responsibilities because no clear job descriptions exist. Alton (2017) sees as the ideal an organised flow of leadership and authority in which every individual should have a clear idea of what their responsibilities are and whom to they ultimately have to report.

4.3 Establishment of student support structure

During the meeting participants noted that some of our students could be regarded as academically vulnerable, struggling academically due to a poor academic background and some are experiencing social and financial challenges. This lack of social and financial support is a barrier to the achievement of academic goals. Karp (2011:1) uses the term “academically vulnerable” to refer to students from backgrounds associated with low levels of postsecondary success. These students are academically underprepared, experiencing low levels of parental education, and low socio-economic status. These aspects emphasise the fact that many students, even those possessing the required academic skills, are at risk to fail at postsecondary level and that they are in need also of non-academic support.

5 LEARNING AND TEACHING

5.1 Empowerment and commitment of lecturers

During the NGT meeting, lecturers mentioned that some of them are not academically and professionally empowered to be successful lecturers to facilitate adult learning. Some of them were appointed without participating in a proper work interview. They also raised their concerns about the lack of commitment among some staff members. Examples of a high level of absenteeism and regular late coming of staff were cited during the meeting. They mentioned work ethics and the sub-standard performance of skills learners as examples of staff not being committed.

Puncreobutr and Watttanasan (2016:58) identified two types of empowerment, namely structural (organisational) and mind empowerment. Structural empowerment focuses on working duties and the participation of workers in an organisation. Mind empowerment is reinforcing the mind. Through that workers become confident in themselves which makes them capable of working successfully. Kahaleh and Gaither (2007) in Puncreobutr and Watttanasan (2016:58) identified a clear relationship between employee empowerment and commitment to the organisation.

5.2 Curriculum

There is a concern about deficiencies in the Skills curricula. Students assigned for WIL, have insufficient knowledge of some of the important aspects of the job they are trained for. For example, students who registered for the Community Health Work (CHW) skills programme cannot for example take patients’ blood pressure correctly. A situation such as this indicates that the balance between theoretical and practical knowledge in the curriculum is disproportionate. It may be for this reason that Aragon, Woo and Marvel (2005:1020), concerning the curriculum, are in favour of industry-based skill standards which are seen as the empowerment of individuals who are entering or returning to the workforce. The former National Skill Standards Board (NSSB) explain skill standards as follows: “Skill standards identify what people need to know and be able to do to successfully perform work-related functions within an industry sector. Specifically, standards define the work to be performed, how well the work must be done, and the level of knowledge and skill required.”

5.3 Resources

The participants were of the view that skills programmes offered should entail more practical than theoretical work; however, resources available do not support the view of making the training more practical at the Centre. The resources available for each skills programme are too few or not available at all, which means that skills training programmes are completed based mainly on theory. Some of the aspects mentioned are:

- Equipment necessary for skills training, such as blood pressure apparatus, computers and sewing machines, is unavailable or undersupplied and outdated. Equipment currently used is not compatible with or suitable for what modern industry or places of work require.
In cases where resources are inadequately provided, teachers start to focus only on theoretical teaching, which leads to students not proficient in the acquisition of skills (Dasmani, 2011:72). If this important part of practical skills is missing in skills training, “vocational and technical training has very little, if any, value to the individual, the community or the economy unless the skills that are learnt enable people to get and hold jobs” (Dasmani, 2011:73).

During the NGT meeting a participant referred to a report compiled by the Occupational Health and Safety officer. She indicated the following as prioritised activities that need urgent attention in the Centre:

- According to the occupational health and safety report by the Department of Labour, the Centre does not comply with health and safety standards; a prioritised requirement for accreditation. The report indicated categorised health and safety issues that need attention in order to comply with Occupational Health and Safety regulations as stipulated in Act 85 of 1993 as amended (RSA, 1993). The Centre must inter alia provide a first aid box with clear indications where this box is kept.
- The Centre should appoint and train a staff member as an Occupational Health and Safety officer.
- There is a need for a valid certificate for electrical installations and it should be ensured that the Centre has safety representatives and a safety policy in place.

6 MARKETING, SELECTION AND ORIENTATION

It emerged from the meeting that a proper marketing strategy is not in place for the CLC. There is little growth in student numbers; consisting of local people. With several options about the choosing of a CLC as a place to further one’s studies, it is important that the section responsible for the marketing of the skills programmes at the CLC should be aware of Absher and Crawford’s views (1996:59) regarding aspects for consideration by students when choosing a CLC. An obvious option when choosing an institution could be because of limited financial resources. Prospective students may choose a CLC because of its close proximity, which eliminates the cost of accommodation and travelling. Research by Absher and Crawford in 1994 (in Absher & Crawford 1996:66) indicates that the following aspects should play an important role when compiling marketing material: (1) Overall quality of education, (2) types of academic programmes, (3) tuition and fees at college, (4) overall reputation of college, and (5) the qualifications of academic staff. The choices that colleges and universities make in relation to their organisational priorities influence how prospective students define institutional quality. During times of economic recession, and as tuition fees increase, these issues are significant indicators for applicants as well as for enrolment officers (Holley & Harris, 2010:17). At the same time these indications can serve as criteria against which an institution can measure its stance in the academic world amongst other institutions.

Based on findings from the NGT meeting, participants noted that some of the students are struggling academically due to poor academic backgrounds. There are also those who experience social and financial problems. Through proper selection, The CLC could identify some of these problems even before the start of the academic programmes and through effective orientation, students can be informed of their responsibilities and what is expected of them. Poock (2002:232) sees orientation as “…any effort on the part of an institution to help entering students to make the transition from their previous environment to the collegiate environment and to enhance their success in [graduate education].”

7 WORK INTEGRATED LEARNING AND EMPLOYMENT

7.1 Partnerships with possible employers

Lecturers raised the lack of partnerships with potential employers for both WIL and possible job placement at the end of training as a matter of concern during the NGT meeting. In their view, students will benefit from such established partnerships. It will be easier for them to find placement for WIL at relevant places of work, which could also create opportunities for employment.

WIL is a critical component in the development of non-technical skills, disciplinary expertise and career self-management competencies required to prepare graduates for the world of work (Jackson,
2018:23). Work readiness which should form a strategic focus of post school institutions, is the ability to function effectively when entering the workforce. Training institutions should create such opportunities in curricular and co-curricular offerings (Jackson, 2018:24).

Industry also has a responsibility to assist in fostering career readiness in students. Through these collaborative partnerships, WIL integrates formal learning with the practical application of skills and knowledge in industry (Jackson, 2018:24).

7.2 Integration of theory and practice

Lecturers indicated that many students find it difficult to make the transition from classroom theory to workplace practice with confidence and effectiveness. Although WIL exists in the institution, lecturers indicated that the duration of some WIL sessions is unregulated and not long enough to expose future workers extensively to the real world of work. Wrenn and Wrenn (2009:258) blame this situation on failure from teachers to integrate theory and practice in their teaching. Professional programmes must prepare workers to become professional practitioners in their chosen field of practice. The best learning environment is created when theory and practice are integrated within a course. Teaching leads to learning, but it is the experiences that are created through teaching that prompt learning (Wrenn & Wrenn, 2009:258).

Boud, Cohen and Walker (1993:8) are of meaning that experience is the central consideration of all learning. They argue that learning builds on and flows from experience and that “...learning can only occur if the experience of the learner is engaged at least at the same level.”

This paper presents the concept accreditation, the NGT process as well as the outcomes of the NGT meeting. Eight skill subject lecturers, who will later become part of the action research project, participated in this meeting. The main idea with the NGT exercise was to find direction for the action research project in which aspects that needed to be addressed could be identified. By means of the NGT, we could identify formative aspects that need to be addressed with the summative aspects as required by the QTCO, before an application for accreditation could be submitted.

The NGT meeting was finished within two hours on a normal working day on the premises of the CLC and no costs were involved. The sharing of individual contributions with the group was informative for all participants. They experienced some contributions as negative and some as positive. Because all participants had equal status, each contribution was considered. This process contributed to collegiality (Cohen et al., 2011:357) which may be of benefit in the action phases of action research where individuals have to work together as a group to implement planned actions. Most important is that we collected enough ideas to form the basis for the collection of further data by means of interviews with potential employers of students. We will also base the contents of a questionnaire for students on the obtained findings that emerged from the NGT meeting. The triangulation of these data will allow the researchers to prioritise actions to be taken in the project and it will set the wheels rolling for the planning and implementation of Cycle 1 of action research.

Aspects that were prioritised during the NGT meeting, were the quality management system, learning and teaching, placement of graduates, advocacy and work integrated learning.

REFERENCES


