

1. INTRODUCTION

The Higher Education Act of 1997 assigns responsibility for quality assurance in higher education in South Africa to the Council on Higher Education (CHE). This responsibility is discharged through its permanent sub-committee, the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC). The mandate of the HEQC includes quality promotion, institutional audit and programme accreditation. As part of the task of building an effective national quality assurance system, the HEQC has also included capacity development and training as a critical component of its programme of activities.

Quality-related criteria constitute a crucial component in the execution of the HEQC's functions, fulfilling the dual purpose of serving as evaluative tools for the HEQC's audit and accreditation activities, as well as setting broad benchmarks for quality management in higher education. The criteria are intended to enable institutions to analyse and reflect on their quality management arrangements and to guide the production of institutional self-evaluation reports.

This document sets out the criteria which will be used in the HEQC's audits of higher education institutions. The HEQC audit will focus on an institution's policies, systems, strategies and resources for quality management of the core functions of teaching and learning, research and community engagement, including the relevant academic support services. The criteria are evaluative tools that enable the institution, the audit panel and the HEQC to focus on important institutional signals and indicators of quality and quality management.

Quality management entails a number of elements of institutional planning and action to address issues of quality. These include institutional arrangements for:

- Quality assurance – the policies, systems, strategies and resources used by the institution to satisfy itself that its quality requirements and standards are being met;
- Quality support – the policies, systems, strategies and resources used by the institution to support and sustain existing levels of quality;
- Quality development and enhancement – the policies, systems, strategies and resources used by the institution to develop and enhance quality; and
- Quality monitoring – the policies, systems, strategies and resources used by the institution to monitor, evaluate and act on quality issues.

The HEQC's criteria encompass all the above dimensions of institutional quality management and cover aspects of input and process as well as outcomes. Where appropriate, the criteria will be supplemented by open-ended questions pertaining to the intellectual identity and culture of the institution.

The HEQC will look at the development and operation of quality management policies and systems, the extent of institutional knowledge about and engagement with them, and their effective use in promoting, developing and improving quality. Institutions have to

provide evidence for claims made in their self-evaluation report about quality-related inputs, processes and outputs. The institutional audit will be conducted by a review panel of peers and experts, supported by senior HEQC personnel. Sampling will be used by audit panels to follow up on institutional judgements about quality management systems. The requirement to provide indicators of success and evidence of effectiveness takes the criteria beyond a checklist of policies and procedures. However, it is recognised that the achievement of quality requires not only effective quality management systems but the professional expertise, competence and commitment of those who are actually engaged in teaching and learning, research and community interactions.

The HEQC's audit criteria address the different stages of academic planning and operations at institutional level where quality considerations should play a role. These stages include policy development, resource allocation, policy implementation, the evaluation of the extent and impact of implementation, and the identification of interventions for improvement and enhancement. Depending on the institution's self-evaluation judgements, the audit panel could focus on quality considerations and the requisite evidence at any or all of the above stages of academic management, as well as enquire about the coordination and/or integration of quality concerns of the different stages indicated above.

The HEQC has taken the following contextual imperatives into account in developing the audit criteria:

- National policy for higher education as articulated in a range of Government White Papers, legislation, regulations and planning documents;
- The HEQC's own policy positions as expounded in the *Founding Document*, the *Institutional Audit Framework* and other policy documents;
- National benchmarks set by the higher education branch of the Department of Education (DoE) for institutional efficiency which include increasing enrolments and graduate outputs, increasing research productivity and improving the diversity profile of graduates;
- The institutional quality landscape, which includes varying levels of capacity, as well as the fact that a number of institutions are involved in mergers and incorporations, and in changes of mission, focus or identity as in the case of comprehensive institutions and universities of technology;
- Partnerships in higher education provision which include collaboration between and among institutions on a regional basis, between public and private provider sectors, between universities and universities of technology, between higher education institutions and industry/companies, and between institutions across national borders; and
- Increasing instances of cross-border provision by foreign and South African higher education institutions, as well as the use of new modes of provision.