

INTRODUCTION: THE HEQC'S QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM

In most countries the last five decades have witnessed fundamental changes in the relationships between HEIs, society and government. This has forced HEIs to redefine themselves in relation to broader societal expectations. A fundamental aspect of this redefinition has been the identification of different areas in relation to which HEIs are accountable to governments and societies.

In the case of South Africa, the changes in the relationship between HEIs and society were brought to the fore in the context of the democratic transition of the 1990s, and the concomitant identification by policy makers of various elements that would contribute to the reconstruction and development of a society weakened by racial discrimination, political oppression and social inequality. Thus, the most general aim of change in post-apartheid South Africa – the development of a just and democratic society, where the majority of the population can share in the wealth of the country and realise individual and collective potential – had to be translated into new missions, strategies and directions in discharging the core functions of HEIs.

This process of translation has been expressed in a host of legislation and policy initiatives, which have identified a number of goals broadly clustered under the concept of transformation. The purpose of the process of transforming higher education is the development of a higher education system that will:

- Promote equity of access and fair chances of success to all who are seeking to realise their potential through higher education, while eradicating all forms of unfair discrimination and advancing redress for past inequalities;
- Meet, through well-planned and co-ordinated teaching, learning and research programmes, national development needs, including the high-skilled employment needs presented by a growing economy operating in a global environment;
- Support a democratic ethos and a culture of human rights by educational programmes and practices conducive to critical discourse and creative thinking, cultural tolerance, and a common commitment to a humane, non-racist and non-sexist social order; and
- Contribute to the advancement of all forms of knowledge and scholarship, and in particular address the diverse problems and demands of the local, national, southern African and African contexts, and uphold rigorous standards of academic quality. (White Paper, 1997: 11, 1.14)

The implementation of these goals is underpinned by three steering mechanisms – planning, funding and quality assurance – around which the national government has developed a broad range of policies and structures. Quality in the national policy for higher education is simultaneously seen as an objective of, and a medium for, the transformation of higher education. As a medium, quality is expressed through a complex set of principles, methodologies and tools crystallised in a quality assurance system whose main responsibility is to reassure individuals, civil society and the government that higher education providers openly, actively and systematically check, monitor, and improve the quality of their academic provision through a variety of means.

Since its launch in 2001, the HEQC has been working on implementing a national system of quality assurance based on a multifaceted approach. This approach is premised on the view that facilitating the achievement of improved quality in the provision of higher education is a powerful way of giving effect to the transformation objectives that inform the vision of education in a democratic South Africa: equitable access with success, and enhanced social responsiveness by HEIs.

A key premise of the quality assurance system proposed by the HEQC is that quality of provision is HEIs' main responsibility. At the same time, the HEQC takes into account the influence that each institution's historical trajectory, missions and aspirations have had on the state of the South African higher education system, its current capacities and future possibilities.

These considerations have led the HEQC to design a system of quality assurance in which programme accreditation (including national reviews), institutional audits, and quality promotion and capacity development, support and interact with one another as parts of a reasonably integrated system, whose objective is to sustain the improvement of the actual quality of provision.

The accreditation function of the HEQC focuses on evaluating the institutions' capacity and preparedness to offer good quality new academic programmes at all undergraduate and postgraduate levels from the point of view of their adherence to a series of minimum standards. National reviews focus, within an accreditation methodology, on assessing the academic provision of selected subjects or programmes at a national level from the point of view of, among other things, their academic governance, teaching and learning practices and the structure of the learning programme, against minimum standards agreed upon by peers and experts.

The focus of the HEQC audit function is quality management: the effectiveness of institutions' internal systems in facilitating continuous and systematic quality development and improvement in higher education and enhancing institutional capacity to plan, act and report on quality-related objectives and achievements (HEQC, 2004d: 5).

Finally, quality promotion and capacity development focus on building and strengthening institutional and systemic knowledge, skills and practices in quality assurance. This is to

enable HEIs to benefit from the implementation of a national quality assurance system by developing their own internal quality assurance mechanisms. The addition of a capacity development function to the national quality assurance agency in South Africa stems from the HEQC's recognition of the consequences that a history of discrimination and planned underdevelopment have had for some HEIs.

The production of good practice guides and manuals is part of the quality promotion and development focus of the HEQC. These guides are tools to help institutions develop their own internal quality assurance mechanisms. In undertaking this activity, as much as in undertaking the rollout of a national system of quality assurance, the HEQC is fully aware that quality assurance systems may be a necessary condition for achieving quality provision but that they are not a sufficient condition for producing quality teaching and learning, research and community engagement. The production of excellent graduates, cutting edge research and innovative community engagement programmes depends not only on the availability of efficient quality assurance mechanisms but also on the sustained nourishing of a community of students and scholars.