



COUNCIL ON HIGHER EDUCATION
Higher Education Quality Committee

**From Minimum Standards to Excellence: Next Steps
in the MBA Review**

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13 August 2004

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The results of the re-accreditation of the 37 MBA programmes undertaken by the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) of the Council on Higher Education (CHE) between 2002 and 2003 were welcomed by many people but also generated anxiety and uncertainty, especially among students enrolled in programmes which had been de-accredited or were conditionally accredited. Since the release of the results, the HEQC has sought to address all queries from students and providers, and to provide more information about the status of these programmes and the next steps which had to be followed. The HEQC has asked all business schools whose MBA programmes were de-accredited to provide an academic phase-out plan to ensure that pipeline students would finish their studies with a credible qualification. The higher education branch of the Department of Education is also monitoring the situation in relation to pipeline students. The HEQC has made it clear that the withdrawal of accreditation will affect the new student intake enrolled after the de-accreditation outcome. Students who had already graduated in the past from such programmes do still have an accredited and recognised qualification listed on SAQA's National Learner Records Database.

The schools offering conditionally accredited programmes have had to supply the HEQC with improvement plans to be able to meet the stipulated conditions for full accreditation as soon as possible. Site visits by expert panels will be set up by the HEQC to validate the implementation of the improvement plans before the change to possible full accreditation. The HEQC is confident that this process will be completed by the middle of next year as it is fully committed to facilitating the speedy move from conditional to full accreditation, based on a demonstration by institutions that their improvement plans have been effectively resourced and implemented to meet the conditions set out in the accreditation report. By this time, the number of fully accredited MBAs in South Africa would increase to 22, if the conditions set by the HEQC are met satisfactorily.

The finalisation of the results of the re-accreditation exercise did not end the involvement of the HEQC in the issue of the quality of the MBA programmes offered in the country. The re-accreditation produced a wealth of information and insights into the MBA which are being analysed by a team of researchers at the Monitoring and Evaluation Directorate of the Council on Higher Education. The purpose of a report by this team is to shift the quality focus from compliance with minimum standards to a discussion about improvement and excellence, based on an identification of the trends, weaknesses, strengths and innovations in management education in South Africa.

The concept of the business school and the MBA was born in America in the 19th century and slowly exported to Europe, Asia, Latin America and Africa. From the late 1980s there has been a global mushrooming of business schools, all of them faced with

the challenge of adapting the MBA content to local conditions. Globalisation and the dramatic changes it has introduced in the corporate world and in business practices are among the explanations given for the growth in the international interest in management. In the United States, business schools were producing 80 000 MBAs a year by 2001. In South Africa, the number of business schools offering the MBA grew from five in the 1960s to the current 27, the majority of which opened only in the last decade.

In the face of this proliferation, current international debates about the MBA have been putting forward two complementary arguments: that MBAs do not deliver what they promise, and that MBA programmes and business schools are facing an identity crisis. Those entering the debate ask two fundamental questions. On the one hand, they ask whether it is possible for MBA programmes to produce a well-educated and well-rounded individual who is able to tackle the range of problems faced by managers in all business contexts within the framework of a two-year degree. On the other, they ask whether the existing curriculum actually delivers to the world of work its expectations of management knowledge and skills. From the literature on business education, the answer to these questions is not entirely positive, raising even further concerns. Has the real world of business management changed in such a way that business schools are no longer offering appropriate management education? Are the adjustments which business schools have to make to produce a 'relevant' MBA compromising the academic credibility of a high level post-graduate qualification? These questions encompass several other issues pertaining to the nature and purpose of the MBA, the relationships of business schools with the corporate world and with the broader society, all of which need to be carefully unpacked if one wants to make sense of the multi-layered and complex reality of contemporary business education.

The State of the Provision of the MBA in South Africa, the research report currently in preparation at the CHE/HEQC, tries to deal with some of these questions in relation to the MBA programmes offered in South Africa, taking as its point of departure the information produced by the re-accreditation of MBAs. Through a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the institutional submissions and the results of the re-accreditation, the report will show that the quality of a programme depends on the interaction between a number of elements which include institutional and programme governance; inputs, such as faculty, students, and teaching and learning infrastructure; the learning programme; and the relationships of the business school with its external corporate and societal environment. The findings of the report confirm the soundness of the emphasis placed by the HEQC on the relationship between the different accreditation criteria, and not, as some critics have argued, on any single output related criterion, in defining the quality of a programme. In line with the shift in focus to improvement and excellence, the report identifies the necessary conditions for new business schools to lay the foundations of a good MBA, and also points to possible improvement trajectories for more established schools. Once it is completed, the full process of accreditation combined with an analytical review of all findings relating to the MBA will hopefully maximise the protection afforded to students from poor quality MBA's as well as provide an improvement agenda that can be taken up by the

business schools themselves as well as by the Association of Heads of Business Schools and other interested parties.

The report on the MBA is organised into eight chapters, which will encompass an overview of the landscape of MBA provision in the country; a criterion-by-criterion analysis of the results of the accreditation process to show the broader trends, weaknesses, strengths and innovations that define the quality of the MBA in South Africa; the content and nature of the MBA programme internationally; the content and structure of the South African MBA; a look at the MBA market from the point of view of both the schools and the students' expectations; issues of programme funding; and the interactions between MBA programmes and society's need for management education. The final chapter will bring all the research findings together and identify the role of stakeholders like business, the state, and the MBA schools themselves, in developing possible trajectories for the improvement and enhancement of the quality of the MBA in order to achieve excellence.

The report will be published at the beginning of November and will be launched at a national conference of stakeholders. The report will be available on the CHE website at www.che.ac.za.