

THE NATIONAL REVIEW OF MBA PROGRAMMES

The re-accreditation of 37 MBA programmes offered by public and private providers of higher education that was finalised in April 2004 was the first national review of a programme undertaken by the HEQC. From the early planning stages it was proposed that the re-accreditation of programmes should be followed by an analytical report that would look into the state of the provision of the MBA at the national level.

The State of the Provision of the MBA in South Africa was prepared taking the results of the re-accreditation exercise as a point of departure for identifying areas of concern and excellence in relation to the 13 criteria developed by the HEQC and for situating local trends and preoccupations in the broader context of the international debates on the MBA.

The 13 criteria developed by the HEQC are distributed into three categories, each of which focuses on a fundamental aspect of the quality of provision of the MBA.

The first category of criteria is focused on *governance* issues. These criteria were designed to assess the extent to which business schools at public and private providers of higher education were inserted into the South African higher education system; how their missions and goals related to the broader developmental and societal objectives of the country; and how they interacted with the higher education institutions in which they were located. Four of the 13 criteria fall into this category.

The second category is constituted by criteria focused on the *learning programme*. This includes the content of the programme and the way in which it is articulated, the pedagogy applied to teaching and learning, the place and manner of assessment, and the weight of research in students' training and its role in curriculum renewal. Eight of the 13 criteria fall into this category.

The third category concentrates on criteria of *context*, i.e. is focused on the relationship between the MBA programme, its stakeholders and its immediate external environment. This area is covered by one criterion.

As will be seen in the report, the 13 criteria, and by implication the HEQC accreditation exercise as such, were focused on the conditions that are necessary for training and educating good managers. The criteria did not focus directly on the quality of MBA graduates as measured by employer or alumni perceptions. This, however, does not mean that the HEQC

criteria did not focus on outcomes. Criteria 9, 10, 11 and 12, which focused on the learning programme, teaching and learning, assessment and research respectively, look closely at business schools' systems and methodologies to assess the outcomes of the learning programme. During site visits, panel members requested examples of examination questions and assignment topics, as well as external examiner reports and dissertations, to satisfy themselves that examinations and assignments were adequately measuring the desired learning outcomes and that dissertations reflected the complexity of analysis expected at a master's level. In relation to fit between graduate skills and labour market expectations, the HEQC asked business schools to provide evidence of their utilisation of the results of employer satisfaction surveys to monitor and improve their programmes and, during site visits, panels interviewed alumni about their experience both of the programme and the interface between the knowledge and skills acquired in the programme and the demands of the world of work.

The HEQC quality assurance system is not designed to assess the quality of education received by individual graduates but to assess whether institutions provide the necessary conditions for quality teaching and learning and the performance of research to take place.

There are two main reasons for the HEQC's decision to prioritise a systemic view of input, process and outputs of quality over one focused on individuals. First, in order to assess individual outcomes the HEQC would have to constitute itself as an all-encompassing examination board operating over and above professional councils and similar organisations that take care of professional standards. This arrangement would be contradictory to the principles of the HEQC, which sees the institutions as chiefly responsible for the quality of their programmes.

In relation to the utilisation of the results of surveys such as those conducted by PMR and Markinor, it is important to point out that there are substantive differences between the purposes of a re-accreditation exercise and those of surveys of employer and student satisfaction. The purpose of surveys is to test standing in the market as regards a limited number of identified skills (and to use this for marketing purposes). The rankings offered by these surveys are the result of employers' judgements of individual graduates. The purpose of re-accreditation is twofold: to assure the public and students that, judged against an agreed-upon set of standards, MBA programmes meet a minimum threshold of quality, and to help programmes to identify paths of improvement and enhancement based on the results of the re-accreditation.

The second reason for the HEQC's focus on quality at the systemic and not at the individual level has to do with the history of South Africa. The devastating effect of apartheid on higher education means that after ten years of democracy it is still possible to differentiate institutions in terms of historical advantage and disadvantage. The market, which by definition is not an allocator of equal opportunity, seems an inadequate point of departure in the construction of a quality assurance system that is trying to level the playing field in order to improve the higher education system.

The national review of the MBA focused on criteria of input, process and outcomes. As regards outcomes specifically, business schools were asked about their mechanisms for monitoring the quality of their courses and graduates in relation to both the expected learning outcomes of the programme and the expectations of external stakeholders. This report has tried to point out the relations between inputs, processes and learning outcomes with respect to each criterion throughout the analysis.

The fact that business schools had to submit a self-evaluation, accompanied by supporting evidence, against the 13 criteria created a wealth of information, to which the actual site visits added meaning and depth through the interaction with the schools' management, staff, students and alumni. *The State of the Provision of the MBA in South Africa* has used all this information to support its analysis of the trends emerging from the results of the re-accreditation process.

At a methodological level this report has quantified the results of the MBA re-accreditation process and cross-referenced them with other variables such as type of provider, mode of delivery, age of the school, etc. to analyse trends in terms of provision. The research team has analysed the data on enrolments, throughputs, research outputs, number of faculty, etc. provided in the institutions' submissions. When the submissions did not contain information on certain issues institutions were approached for pertinent data. The team sent out questionnaires to specific individuals, conducted some interviews with heads of schools and academic staff, and used all the resources available to produce a picture of the state of the provision of MBAs in South Africa that would be as complete and nuanced as possible, within a reasonable time.

The report is organised in five chapters and two appendices. Chapter 1 interprets quantitative data to describe the landscape of the provision of the MBA in South Africa in its historical context. It advances reasons for the rapid expansion of MBA programmes in the last decade-and-a-half and points to some detrimental effects of the recent expansion on the quality of the MBA.

Chapter 2 focuses on the quality of MBA programmes with regard to the 13 re-accreditation criteria. It analyses how different types of providers fared on each criterion and draws conclusions about the role that institutional history and identity play in shaping various aspects of programme quality. The chapter argues that the 13 evaluation criteria are interrelated and that the quality of a programme can only be assessed in relation to the combined criteria.

Chapter 3 focuses on the international history of the definition of the MBA as a professional degree at the master's level, from the establishment of the first schools of business in the US at the end of the 19th century to the most recent discussions of the role of business education in a globalised economy. It explores how the changing definitions of the MBA have affected South African programmes. The chapter argues that, internationally, the tension between a

'professional MBA' and an 'academic MBA' has been made more acute with the development of global markets in the late 1990s and the current centrality of business and entrepreneurship in society, and that this is eroding the place for and value of research at business schools. In the case of South Africa, this is compounded both by the legacy of a higher education system designed to reproduce disadvantage and by the comparative newness of many programmes.

Chapter 4 focuses on the MBA learning programme and constitutes the heart of this report. The chapter analyses the structure, content and pedagogy of the MBA programmes that entered the re-accreditation process against the backdrop of the most important international debates on the purpose, content and pedagogy of MBAs. It argues that the realisation of learning outcomes depends on both student selection and the programme's academic governance; that the trend in some programmes to dilute research training and diminish the importance of the MBA dissertation undermines the standing of the MBA as a postgraduate degree; and that weak or non-existent faculty research production compromises the relevance of the MBA for the South African business world.

Chapter 5 looks at the MBA from the point of view of its role in redefining the relationship between business and society through the training of managers and the production of research. It analyses emerging trends in corporate social responsibility and their impact on curriculum content. It suggests that South African business schools can potentially play a fundamental role in re-shaping business practices in the country and in redefining what business in society means.

Appendix 1 provides the complete list of the 13 re-accreditation criteria with their respective minimum standards. Appendix 2 presents the results of the participation of some MBA programmes in the preparation of this report. All MBA programmes that were commended in terms of one or more criteria were asked to prepare mini-case studies of their activities in these specific areas, to be included in this report as examples of good practice. Not all schools managed to meet a very tough deadline. The cases which are not available in this report will be available, like the report itself, on the CHE website www.che.ac.za as soon as the business schools are ready.

We have tried to convey a balanced view of the state of the provision of the MBA in South Africa, pointing out the undermining effects of some trends and practices on the quality of the programmes and the good practices that support constant quality improvement. Understanding the 'good' and the 'bad' practices, the conditions from which they stem, their internal implications and their external effects is part of the decision to move from good to better and from better to excellent.

We hope that this report will generate both debate and action and thus contribute to a better understanding of the MBA in South Africa and an overall improvement in the quality of the programmes.