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HEQC Evaluative Study of Institutional Audits 2006

Higher Education Quality Committee

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Researchers:
Sharman Wickham,
Gonda Coetzee,
Barbara Jones,
Anthea Metcalfe

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Didacta Building

211 Skinner Street

Pretoria

South Africa

PO Box 13354

The Tramshed

0126

South Africa

Tel. +27 12 392 9132

Fax. +27 12 392 9120

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ACRONYMS

APC	Audit Portfolio Committee
BCUC	Buckinghamshire Chilterns University College
CC	Coordinating Committee
CERTEC	Certification Council for Technikon Education
CHED	Centre for Higher Education Development
CUT	Central University of Technology
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HEMIS	Higher Education Management Information System
HEQC	Higher Education Quality Committee
HoD	Head of Department
IASC	Institutional Audit Steering Committee
QA	Quality Assurance
QAM	Quality Assurance Manager
QIP	Quality Improvement Plan
QMS	Quality Management System
RMT	Rector's Management Team
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
SAQA	South African Qualifications Authority
SER	Self Evaluation Report
SETAs	Sector Education and Training Authorities
SRC	Student Representative Council
SU	Stellenbosch University
UCT	University of Cape Town

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SECTION A: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

This introductory section explains the purpose of this study, describes the institutions it covers, outlines its research approach and methodology, introduces the research team, and finally notes the limitations of the study.

A.1 THE STUDY AND ITS PURPOSE

The focus for the data collection and analysis and the structure of this report were outlined by the HEQC. Consistent with its commitment to reflective practice, the HEQC has been conducting a number of focused evaluations of its systems that are geared to improving and eventually reviewing the methodologies used in the four areas of quality assurance that constitute its main responsibilities: programme accreditation, national reviews, institutional audits, and quality promotion and capacity development.

The overall aim of this study is to evaluate the extent to which the institutional audits of higher education institutions conducted by the HEQC since 2004 have taken place in an efficient and effective manner in each of their phases and in relation to the individuals and structures involved in the process. A key question is how far the audits have advanced the objectives set out by the HEQC in its *Framework for institutional audits (June 2004)*.

More explicitly, the HEQC wanted to know:

- How did the audited institutions experience each phase of the audit process?
- What effects did each of the phases have on the institutions?
- How did the institutions (in all their various layers) perceive the audit?
- What were the positive and negative outcomes of the audit for the institutions (again in all their layers)?

A.2 THE INSTITUTIONS INCLUDED IN THE STUDY

On-site visits and face-to-face interviews took place at three public institutions between April and June 2005 – the Central University of Technology (audited in 2004), Rhodes University and Stellenbosch University (both audited in 2005), and two private providers – the Management College of South Africa and CityVarsity Film and Television Multimedia School (both audited in 2004). Each of these institutions constituted a case for this study. In addition, permission was granted to use information from the internal evaluation report on the institutional audit at the University of Cape Town (audited in 2005). These six institutions are referred to in this report as CUT, Rhodes, SU, Mancosa, CityVarsity and UCT. It is important to note that while this study covers six distinct institutions the sample does not represent all the higher education institutions in South Africa, since some institutional types (such as historically disadvantaged institutions and large private institutions) were not included.

It needs to be noted that, while useful in further developing and confirming patterns and trends noted in the data collected in the other five institutions, the findings documented in the UCT internal evaluation report do not address all the questions and issues raised in the interviews at the other five institutions where face-to-face interviews took place. (The UCT internal evaluation report was based on data collected through questionnaires sent to staff who had participated in the audit. A total of 258 questionnaires was sent and there were 45 responses.) Besides the internal evaluation report, a paper written by a senior staff member at UCT, based on this report and providing further interpretation of its findings, was given to the research team.

Each of the five case study reports developed for this study begins with a brief profile of the institution, highlighting its unique features and helping develop an understanding of the variety of responses to the experience of audit that this study found.

While there are clear distinctions between the larger, well-established public institutions and the smaller, relatively new, private providers, there are also important differences between the institutions which fall into these two categories. For example, CUT had been granted university status around the time of the audit, while Rhodes, SU and UCT have enjoyed this status since their inception. While the latter may be categorised as traditional universities, their different histories and locations have affected their structures, cultures and policies and, as will be seen in this report, their responses to and experiences of audit. Differences were also noted between the two private providers. CityVarsity focuses on film, television and multimedia, Mancosa on management studies. This, too, resulted in different perceptions and understandings of audit and different experiences of the phases and processes.

Staff members themselves, interviewed in this study, held the view that their institutions have distinctive characteristics which might not be easily understood by ‘outsiders’. For example, the researcher who visited Rhodes, herself an old Rhodian, was often told by interviewees that she would understand a particular point being made because of her previous knowledge and experience of this institution.

It was also noted that the interviewees at the participating institutions differed in the extent of their knowledge about quality assurance and institutional audit. While all had certain views of audit prior to the audit itself, staff at the three traditional universities also displayed what might be termed a deeper knowledge of the debates and contestations relating to audit. The researchers who visited Rhodes and SU noted that certain interviewees here were able to refer to a body of literature on the topic and were likely to have developed stronger positions and perspectives on approaches to quality assurance than those at the university of technology and the private institutions. The internal evaluation report from UCT also refers to recent international literature on audit, the review of which may have contributed to their positions and perspectives and the processes and procedures followed. There was less evidence of such knowledge among staff at the small private providers and, for the most part, at the university of technology.

Finally, as will be highlighted in Section B of the report, besides differences across and within categories of institutions, there were also considerable differences in the responses to questions posed in the interviews *within the individual institutions*. The absence of an institutional voice suggests that these institutions are not homogeneous entities but composed of complex layers that cannot easily be characterised. In some cases there were contradictions between the various layers of the institutions (e.g. senior managers and academics, or main campus and satellite campus personnel) while in other cases responses were more dependent on the primary identities of the interviewees (e.g. researchers versus teachers). The most contradictory responses were those from interviewees at Rhodes, where it seemed that ideological positions and views of quality and quality assurance may have been influential. In highlighting the lack of institutional voices, this report attempts to make sense of the variety of responses across and within institutions.

A.3 THE RESEARCH APPROACH, PROCESS AND METHODS

The approach used

From the inception of the study, and as highlighted in its research specifications for this study, the HEQC was aware that 2006 was too early to implement a full impact study of the audit system. However, it was also recognised that a number of the steps that constitute the current audit methodology could be evaluated formatively. Similarly, the HEQC has learned that in preparing for the audit higher education institutions have often identified gaps to be filled, processes that need to be developed, and so on. While these discoveries do not affect quality now, since their effect on institutional behaviour will only be seen later, many of them provide first-hand evidence of what might be achieved, and will need to be further researched at the appropriate time and in a fuller impact study. This study focuses on the *experience of audit* as reported by selected staff members who engaged in the process. A number of these interviewees were (and continue to be) central to the audit processes in the various phases, so were well positioned to reflect on developments within the institution as they went through these phases. A qualitative approach, which encourages reflective and open responses, enabled the researchers and interviewees to explore experiences and perceptions and consider suggestions as to how the HEQC could enhance its own practice in future audits.

In addition, telephone interviews were conducted with a sample of the auditors who had worked on the audit panels at each of the six institutions included in the study. While the questions in these interviews were also about the experience of audit and suggestions for improvement, they differed from those the institutional staff were asked, as they focused on the auditors' processes and activities.

Preparation

A heuristic tool based on the purpose of the study and the HEQC's *Framework for institutional audits* was developed by the research team in conjunction with HEQC staff and used as a guide for developing the interview schedules, formulating questions during site visits and telephone interviews and analysing the data collected. All members of the research team attended HEQC auditor preparation sessions before starting the fieldwork, so as to better familiarise themselves with the phases of audit and their associated processes and issues. In addition, during the preparation period, documents prepared by the institutions and the HEQC, including the Self-Evaluation Reports (SERs) and the Audit Reports, were read in order to gain insights into the institutional contexts and the issues likely to be raised in interview sessions.

The interview schedules

Two interview schedules were developed in conjunction with HEQC staff during the preparation period. The first was used during site visits to institutions where face-to-face interviews were conducted, mostly with individuals but some with focus groups, and a shortened version (without the specific questions that were later developed) was sent to interviewees prior to the site visits. (The full version is provided in Appendix A.) The second was used in telephone interviews with the auditors who had worked on the audit panels at each of the six institutions. (See Appendix B for this schedule.) Here, the focus shifted from the experience of being audited to being an auditor and what had been learnt through this process. Certain issues raised in the interviews with staff in the participating institutions were also included in the final interview questionnaire (e.g. how much documentation had been collected by institutional staff).

On-site interviews with institutional staff

During the site visits, the interview schedules were used fairly flexibly in the majority of interviews and in many cases researchers found that the respondents needed little encouragement in the way of questions or probes once they had begun answering the opening questions. The majority of interviewees, particularly those in the larger institutions, spoke from their own individual experience rather than from an institutional perspective. Interviewees at the small private providers, where responsibilities for various functions are allocated to senior staff, were better positioned to provide a stronger institutional voice.

In most cases the staff and students who were interviewed were frank and direct in responding to the questions, and in certain cases interviewees responded quite emotionally, providing researchers with keen insights into the powerful effect that audit may have on individuals who participate in the process.

The emphasis given to certain questions at institutions during site visits (and, therefore, to the data collected in the study) was influenced by the phase the institution had reached in the audit process. For example, the Audit Report had been received at one of the institutions just prior to the researcher’s visit and this influenced the extent to which participants responded to the questions posed: they were far more interested in the questions related to this phase of audit than those related to the earlier phases.

It was noted that at a couple of institutions some of the less senior staff confused the audit experience with other recent events such as programme reviews and accreditation. This, too, was treated as useful data and highlights the ongoing challenges the HEQC faces in establishing its identity and purpose in the higher education sector.

Finally, a number of interviewees had difficulty remembering when improvements in their institution had initially been introduced or implemented. This meant that they were unable to link changes and developments to the various phases of the audit experience. This point is discussed further in the sub-sections which highlight the limitations of the study and, later, the nature of change in higher education and its institutions.

Telephone interviews with auditors

Telephone interviews were conducted with selected auditors, including panel chairs and report writers. The sample was shaped by those auditors who were available and willing to participate in the study. Some of the auditors who were interviewed had already served on more than one audit panel so drew on their combined experiences. The interviews focused on the experience of audit, preparations made prior to the site visit, suggestions for improvement, the interviews themselves, and the contributions auditors had made to the Audit Report. The questions the auditors were asked differed from those the institutional staff were asked, since they followed the auditors' processes and activities. Additional questions were also put to the panel chairs and report writers.

Much of the data collected during these interviews served to confirm the data collected from the institutional staff. In addition, some of the findings from these interviews provided insights and perspectives not available to institutional staff.

The research team

The research team consisted of four independent researchers, each of whom has worked in the higher education sector for a number of years. The coordinator of the team, Sharman Wickham, had conducted an evaluation of the three pilot audits for the HEQC in 2004/5.

The primary researcher appointed at each institution was responsible for the initial preparation (including reading and summarising documents, specifying questions, setting up appointments), undertaking the majority of the interviews and writing institutional case studies. The final report was written by Dr Sharman Wickham with inputs from the rest of the research team. While the case study reports were largely descriptive, reporting the detail of the interviewees' responses, the final report, in synthesising the findings of these case studies, introduces a stronger evaluative voice.

The limitations of the study

While this was not a full impact study, the research team tried to provide the fullest possible understanding of the effects of the phases and activities associated with audit, as requested by the HEQC. However, as already noted, a number of interviewees found it difficult to recall the chronology of activities in the different phases of audit and the possible effects of these. It is suggested that when planning a full impact study this limitation needs to be addressed by conducting interviews during the earlier audit phases as well as after the reception of the Audit Report.

Two other preliminary documents completed for this study should be noted here. The first is a literature review of previous evaluative and impact studies. Here, the limitations of such studies are discussed in greater detail. The second is the redesign of a post-audit questionnaire used in a number of institutions included in this study. Both these pieces of work should be used in conjunction with this report when planning future impact studies.

SECTION B: THE EXPERIENCE OF AUDIT

Section B has six sub-sections, corresponding to the five phases of audit included in this study: the pre-audit preparation phase (B 1–4), the site visit (B 5–7), the pre-report phase B 8–10), the reception of the report phase (B 11–14), the development of the quality improvement plan (B 15–17), and improvement period 1 (B 18–21). The scheduling of the audit process meant that the seventh phase, improvement period 2, was not included in this study.

PHASE ONE: THE PRE-AUDIT PREPARATION PHASE

The pre-audit phase required considerable attention from certain staff members at all the institutions in this study. However, the extent of staff participation and the processes followed in developing the Self-Evaluation Report (SER) and preparing for the site visit varied from institution to institution. It is not surprising, then, that interviewees' reports of their experiences and the changes introduced during this phase also varied not only from institution to institution but also amongst interviewees within individual institutions. In attempting to understand these variations – even contradictions – and the absence of an institutional voice, a number of determinants are cited as playing important roles, a key one being the institution's own context, particularly its prior knowledge and understanding of audit and its purpose. Other factors, such as the position and role of the key role players, particularly the Quality Assurance Manager (QAM), and the timing of the audit, were also important.

This section begins by outlining the interviewees' initial responses to and concerns about audit. It then describes the extent of staff (and student) participation in developing the SER, and key elements of the HEQC audit approach – the use of the criteria and open-ended questions and the identification of evidence – in engaging staff in critical reflection and identifying and implementing improvements. Section B4 considers the effectiveness and efficiency of this first phase of audit.

B.1 INITIAL RESPONSES TO AUDIT

As already indicated in Section A of this report, institutional context influenced a number of processes during each of the phases of audit, including the initial responses to the prospect of audit and the concerns that were raised. It is clear, too, that initial responses were important in shaping the audit process as it unfolded. It also needs to be noted that the relationship between institutional context and initial responses is not straightforward: each institution has complex layers that differ in important ways and influence how individual staff within each layer respond to external monitoring processes.

The influence of institutional context on initial responses

Initial responses to the audit largely depended on the institutions' prior knowledge and understanding of audit and similar processes, in particular how they understood the purpose of audit, and these, in turn, appear to have been shaped by the institution's own identity, purpose and understanding. As a result, there are some noticeable differences between the initial responses of the traditional universities (Rhodes, SU and UCT) and those of the university of technology and the two small private institutions. At the former, a number of interviewees drew on their broader and richer understandings of the purpose and processes of institutional audit, to both support and critique it as a mechanism for state steering or control in the higher education sector generally; at the latter, responses tended to be focused on the more immediate effects of the HEQC audit on their own institution. The extent to which interviewees in the traditional universities elaborated on the question of state steering or control differed considerably. For example, as will be seen in Section B2, it was reported that the discussions on both 'state interference' and the 'real agenda' of the HEQC were stronger at Rhodes than at SU. These differences might be the result of a host of factors, ranging from the operational modes and styles of the institutions to the influence of key individual role players at these institutions. There are also some interesting differences between the initial responses reported at the two private institutions. For example, Mancosa's earlier partnership with Buckinghamshire Chilterns University College (BCUC), a college of the University of Brunel in the UK, was, in part, responsible for the existence of a quality assurance system, including a quality assurance committee, prior to the HEQC audit. This institution's understanding of audit and of the processes used in preparing for audit had therefore been shaped by this system and committee.

Initial understandings of the purpose of audit and the terminology used

While the issues of purpose and terminology may be examined separately, in their responses to questions institutional staff moved from the one to the other and back again. The connections between these issues become apparent in the following discussion.

At the three traditional universities, the prospect of audit had been recognised and discussed several years prior to the HEQC audit and at SU and Rhodes a number of similar processes had already been introduced internally. At SU for example, senior managers had been involved in a 'mock audit' in February 2004. This was described as an 'aerial survey' that involved critical self-evaluation. As a result of this exercise, a small group of staff members had introduced the concept and process of self-reflection and were able to support those for whom this was unfamiliar in the HEQC audit.

At Rhodes, too, it was reported that knowledge of similar international audits and anticipation of the HEQC audit had prompted senior management to introduce internal processes that heightened accountability prior to the HEQC audit. It was acknowledged, however, that these processes had not been very successful and that there had been considerable resistance to them from many academic staff, who expressed misgivings about increased state control and suspicions about the agenda of the HEQC audit. Some of these academics reported in the interviews for this study that even at this stage of the audit process and despite 'a lot of spin', they believed the agenda for the HEQC audit was transformation rather than quality assurance, and for some the panel interviews and the results of the Audit Report served to confirm their suspicions.

Despite the resistance, it was reported that senior management staff had welcomed the opportunity to learn more from the HEQC audit so as to improve their institution's internal quality assurance processes and strengthen institutional foci and niche areas. It was also reported that Rhodes had suggested the date for their inclusion in the HEQC audit process so it would dovetail with their previously planned academic review – not merely to limit the staff workload, but also to ensure that the external audit process would strengthen the internal review processes.

At UCT, a literature review of external quality assurance agencies was undertaken prior to audit and the information gained through this exercise appeared to have enriched staff members' thinking about the purpose of audit – especially its developmental aspect – and also shaped some of their initial thinking about how to proceed during the preparatory phase.

In speaking about the pre-audit phase and their initial responses, interviewees at all layers at SU provided detailed reasons as to why they saw audit as important for higher education institutions. For example, the majority of staff mentioned that, as a state asset, SU is accountable to the state and the public, and therefore they have to engage with sensitive issues no matter what their own point of view might be. Senior managers said they had supported the HEQC approach of achieving self-accreditation status through an external peer review process. Deans and HoDs also responded positively to the audit process, despite the extra work, because they understood the HEQC exercise as developmental rather than mere inspection.

While these retrospective responses might be gratifying for the HEQC, the extent to which they reflect the interviewees' understandings and perceptions *during* the early stages of the audit is difficult to determine, and one cannot discount the extent to which some staff members may have been rehearsed so as to ensure they provided favourable responses. It also needs to be noted that certain interviewees at this institution reported that they and others had not initially fully understood or appreciated the developmental purpose of audit during this phase. They explained that the term 'audit' tended to be associated with financial audit and had punitive connotations. It was also reported that for some staff much of the language of audit (e.g. 'fitness for and of purpose') was initially viewed as 'political jargon' and that this may have influenced their responses.

Suspicion of jargon was also reported to have been an issue at Rhodes. Here, it was reported that, despite frequent assurances and explanations from staff in the QA Office, the term 'audit' conveyed a negative message and people assumed there would be a strong financial focus. The replacement terms 'institutional evaluation' or 'assessment' were thus suggested, as it was thought they would make people more amenable to the process. The phrase 'fitness *of* purpose' in particular made staff members question the ideologies underlying audit and the motives behind the HEQC one in particular. It was explained that while staff were not opposed to the national goals for higher education per se, many were not in favour of the institution becoming an agent of the state. In addition, they viewed their independence and autonomy as extremely important. Even prior to the HEQC audit, questions had been raised about the extent to which internal institutional processes were limiting academic autonomy and there was already a sense that there was too much in the way of monitoring, overseeing and direction.

The need for certain staff to 'decode' the language of audit was also reported in interviews. Those staff members who had attended auditors' training workshops or sat on audit panels at other institutions were asked to help with this problem.

The difficulties of understanding the HEQC's purpose and terminology were reported to be far greater at CUT, one of the first institutions to be audited, and the two small private institutions, especially CityVarsity with its strong emphasis on creative programmes, than at SU and Rhodes. Staff at CUT reported that their initial understandings of audit as a form of 'policing' or 'inspection' may have been influenced by their previous experiences of CERTEC (The Certification Council for Technikon Education) and its approach in regulating programmes at technikons. The lack of knowledge among staff at these institutions about institutional audit in the higher education sector internationally further limited their understanding.

Another complication during this early phase (and one that was reported by a number of interviewees at all the institutions included in this study) was caused by the similarities and differences between the terms and processes of *programme accreditation* and *institutional audit*. These differences were not always clearly understood. A staff member at CUT also observed that differences in the terminology and assessment requirements used by relevant higher education professional bodies such as the SETAs and SAQA further clouded the issue. Again, suggestions were made for alternative terms – for example, 'benchmarking' was viewed as preferable as a term for the process because it was seen to carry stronger connotations of striving for excellence or improvement. The CUT case study reports: 'It was felt that the HEQC could have given more attention to the question, "Why we are doing this" – i.e. the developmental purpose of and philosophy behind quality assurance' and that 'if audit had been understood as a validation of the self-evaluation report', both the initial responses to and later preparation for audit might have been different.

Some apprehension was reported to have been felt during the initial stages of audit at both the private providers. At CityVarsity, a staff member recalled that there was a fear that 'we might be shut down or rapped over the knuckles'. Alongside this fear was another – the possibility that staff members' creativity and autonomy might be curtailed or stifled. These fears were somewhat allayed by senior management's explanations of the HEQC's intentions and processes.

While interviewees at the senior management level at Mancosa reported that they had welcomed the opportunity to be audited as they believed participation would provide them with possible new insights which would strengthen the institution, a number of academic staff reported that, initially, they had felt anxious and viewed the audit as a kind of inspection. A staff member who had previously worked at an institution that had been de-accredited said this experience had aggravated his fears. Other staff members who had experienced the MBA review processes at Mancosa expressed greater confidence. According to one interviewee, the accreditation processes and the audit asked for similar information, so in a sense the audit had been about 'answering the same thing in different ways'. Comments such as this, or 'the audit was more for the government to formalise things in the private institutions and ensure we were doing the right things', suggest that although interviewees felt reasonably confident about the quality of their work, their understanding of audit remained somewhat limited.

Although many interviewees, at all the institutions in this study, tended to be philosophical about their own and other people's resistance in the early stages of the audit process ('human beings do not like change'), such resistance often meant that staff began the development of the SER in compliance mode and without understanding the need to engage reflectively and critically with institutional culture or practices. As indicated later in this report, many staff members reported that eventually they came to recognise the potential value of their participation in this phase. (Despite this realisation, wider participation was not always evident in the development of the Improvement Plan, as indicated later in this report.)

Associated with the purpose of audit is its focus on quality assurance arrangements rather than quality itself. For some interviewees, this was surprising and they initially viewed it as too narrow a focus.

The inevitability of audit

The inevitability of audit and the sense that institutions and their staff needed to make the best of it were common features of the initial responses at all the institutions studied. A dean at one institution likened the audit to a visit to the dentist 'where you want it over, with as little pain as possible'. 'Comply and supply' was a phrase used by a number of staff members at one of the private institutions to capture their experience of facing audit. This phrase illustrates the compliance approach, and the emphasis placed on providing supporting documentation and evidence, an important aspect of the preparation phase.

Concerns about anticipated additional workloads

Even before preparations for audit had got under way, many staff realised the time and effort they would require. For example, some staff at Rhodes acknowledged that they would need to document 'a lot of stuff that they carried around in their heads'. Concerns about the workload grew as the audit process unfolded and the frequent recommendations that it be reduced pose a challenge for the HEQC as it develops a more efficient approach for future audits.

Certainly these concerns influenced the way preparations for audit were undertaken in the institutions included in this study – especially the extent of participation by academic staff. In fact, ironically, the approach adopted at SU was deemed successful because it kept the audit away from academic staff, as the case study for this institution records. Similarly, one of the guiding principles established in preparing for audit at UCT was to ensure that the process would not be too burdensome for academics. At Rhodes, too, academics were pleased with the way management handled the audit so as not to increase their workloads.

The administrative work required in this first phase, together with its implications for the time that academic staff could give to what they perceived to be their core business – teaching and research – is further detailed later in this section.

Concerns about the timing of audit

Concerns about the extent to which institutions were 'ready' to embark on the audit process were raised at a few of the institutions and may have had implications for the time and energy certain staff members were able to give to engaging with audit processes. Where institutions were undertaking a number of other major developments at the time of the audit, there were competing priorities. For example, in 2004 and 2005, SU was engaged in institutional rightsizing and academic restructuring processes. It was reported that senior staff hoped their involvement in the HEQC audit would inform these other processes, but it was also reported that greater attention may have been given to internal processes, especially where these were perceived to have higher stakes than the HEQC audit. In addition, while division of labour was reported at the level of senior management (the Rector being responsible for the restructuring exercise while a vice-rector managed the audit process), there was no such division for deans, who were responsible for managing both processes simultaneously within their faculties. It was also suggested that the decision taken to limit academic staff members' involvement in the audit exercise may have been a trade-off to secure support for the restructuring process that was under way.

As already indicated, senior management at Rhodes requested a date for the audit that followed the internal academic review. While there were advantages to this arrangement (including reducing academics' workload for the audit), it seems that the two processes had different drivers and the work required for the two could not be easily linked. As the case study for Rhodes states, 'It was suggested that the academic review process was more concerned with resource allocation and meeting policy requirements rather than reflecting on how to improve QA arrangements as envisaged in the HEQC process'. It may be that the emphasis given to the former actually inhibited a more critical and reflective response to the latter.

At CUT, it was reported that the recent incorporation of the Welkom campus and the change of status from a technikon to a university of technology required considerable attention at the time of the audit. It was even suggested by one interviewee that it was hoped the preoccupation with these activities, and the fact that the institution was one of the first to be audited, would encourage the HEQC and the audit panel to be more lenient in their assessment!

The importance of a positive judgement – positive and negative consequences

While securing self-accreditation status with its associations of institutional autonomy was viewed as a 'carrot on a stick' by certain staff at some institutions, receiving a positive judgement by the HEQC was also seen to be particularly important for marketing the institution and recruiting students – not only for the small private providers but also for the larger well-established universities. It was understood that the general public, particularly students and their parents, would be interested in the audit results. While recognising the developmental purpose of the audit, a senior manager in one of the small private providers said, 'For students, this can be quite revealing of the situation. Make no mistake, the judgement is there – although maybe not overt'.

The importance accorded to receiving a positive judgement from the HEQC may be seen as having both positive and negative effects. On the positive side, it ensured that the institutions complied with the requirements of audit; on the negative, the need for a positive result may have detracted from and overshadowed the audit's aim of improving and enhancing higher education, as institutions may have worked to ensure that their SERs reflected their good points rather than their weaknesses.

The importance of ensuring that institutions understand the intentions behind audit – especially the identification of areas of weakness for future improvement – are again taken up in the concluding section of this report, which focuses on how the HEQC can strengthen its approach to audit.

B.2 PARTICIPATION IN DEVELOPING THE SELF-EVALUATION REPORT

Sections B.2 and B.3 are two of the most important sections of this report not only because a number of staff in the institutions gave so much time to developing the SER, but also because their participation in this exercise appears to have been critical in developing new understanding – especially about audit and quality assurance and the need for improving quality assurance arrangements and processes. It seems, therefore, that the extent of participation and the approach followed in preparing for audit have important implications for both individual and institutional learning. These two areas of learning are, however, not seamlessly linked, i.e. individual learning does not necessarily translate into institutional learning.

This section begins by describing the extent of staff and student participation in developing the SER and then outlines factors considered influential in shaping the way this document was developed. Here, too, institutional context played a role, in that initial understandings of audit and previous experiences of similar processes were important. In addition, the position, status and role of the QAM and the knowledge resources available at the institution were critical factors. It was also found that time constraints and workloads, audit costs and audit timelines greatly influenced the extent to which staff participated in the exercise. Finally, it seems that learning from other, previously audited institutions was useful in shaping the approach followed in this phase of the audit and the extent of staff participation.

The extent of staff and student participation

It was found that while the extent of staff participation during this phase of the audit varied from institution to institution, it was generally reported to be quite limited. For example, it was estimated that fewer than ten percent of staff members at SU participated in the first two phases of the audit process and their participation was often quite limited. For example, it was reported that when it became clear that coaching people to complete certain tasks (such as identifying useful evidence) would be too time-consuming, staff were requested to merely send the documentation they had collected for staff in the Quality Office to work with. At Rhodes, participation of staff in developing the SER was limited to the 15 to 20 members of the Audit Portfolio Committee (APC). The report remained within the APC until it took a more final form, after which it was circulated more broadly for comment. At UCT, the challenge of reducing the amount of work academics would have to do on the SER while simultaneously securing their approval for the final document was met by using the services of professional and support staff in the initial stages of its development.

While the smaller staff complement at CityVarsity meant that a larger percentage participated in the audit process, it was reported that it was mostly senior management who were involved in the pre-audit preparation and that HoDs were responsible only for supplying information and documentation as requested. Similarly at Mancosa, a task team of senior managers drove the preparation process with middle management and lecturing staff drawn into the process as and when required. At CUT, although task teams were established and selected staff members were asked to provide input for the SER, its development was described by some interviewees as ‘a one-man show’. In addition, what one task team learned was not shared with other teams, let alone the broader institutional community.

The extent to which students participated in the audit preparations also varied from institution to institution. Regular and broad engagement with the student body was reported to be a key feature of the SU audit process. A fifth-year law student, who held the Academic Affairs portfolio in the SRC, played a valued role in arranging and conducting information sessions at the residences and contributed to the section on student leadership and academic support structures in the SER, and approximately three months before the audit visit, senior staff from the QA Office met with the Student Parliament, one of the largest consultative bodies at SU, to provide additional information about the process and to respond to students’ questions.

At Mancosa, on the other hand, there was no student involvement in the audit preparation phase – partly because of the unique institutional context of this institution. The chair of the student committee explained that because student representatives are employed and have other commitments it was difficult to expect them to help with preparations. Despite this, students interviewed for this study felt that management had been transparent about the whole audit process. At Rhodes also, very little student participation was reported: it appears that there was only one information session with the SRC Executive during this phase.

The influence of institutional context on participation

Once again, institutional and contextual factors influenced the way staff were encouraged to participate in developing the SER. Here, staff members’ initial understanding and previous experience of audit was important as a knowledge resource at the institution. One of the most critical role players in the institutions during this phase was the QAM: the data collected suggest that this person's position, perceived status and role were important in shaping the approach followed. The more traditional universities seemed to have an advantage here, as they were able to draw on their own staff members' considerable knowledge and expertise for developing the SER. While this worked well in some institutions, it did little to encourage wider participation. For example, the Director of the newly established Academic Planning and Quality Assurance Office at SU played a key role in this stage of the process, writing the initial and later drafts of the SER and incorporating feedback from other staff members. The SU case study report highlights the valuable educational role played by this person in explaining the concepts of self-evaluation and evidence and interrogating the evidence provided by staff members. In addition, it was noted that SU had the skills required to interpret the data, synthesise findings and present the diverse opinions that exist at this institution.

At Rhodes, the Director of Quality Assurance had been involved in this area of work since discussions about quality were first held in this country. She reported that she had worked closely with the Vice-Chancellor and a recently retired vice-principal, who was still active in quality assurance work nationally, in formulating the process followed in developing the SER.

At CUT on the other hand, where a good understanding of the purpose of audit and strong champions for quality assurance were lacking, staff members' previous experience of CERTEC was used to develop the SER. This meant that staff members understood their participation in terms of complying with regulations and procedures rather than critically engaging with each other or reflecting on the work of the institution. It was reported that although some senior staff understood that the CERTEC and HEQC philosophies differ, they found it difficult to move out of the CERTEC approach in this early phase. Another reason suggested for the lack of critical reflection at this institution during this phase was the militarist and hierarchical culture that existed along with an autocratic leadership style which, according to a CUT interviewee had the effect of 'dampening innovation, initiative and creativity'.

The CUT case study report records an interviewee's evaluation: 'The audit itself needs to be a developmental exercise, especially at an institution like CUT where the "old technikon" mindset still prevails, as people do not have the same understandings of quality assurance arrangements as the HEQC. This could be assisted by more frequent communication with the HEQC before, during and after the audit, with staff at all levels, so that the philosophy as well as the practical implementation of quality assurance arrangements cascades right down to junior staff who are responsible for implementation, and so that it is not just owned by senior management.'

Another observation made here was that a staff member from the QA Office who drove the preparation process lacked institutional power, did not enjoy sufficiently strong leadership qualities and was not given meaningful support from senior management. As a result, the message of quality improvement was not driven home institutionally and the preparation process was neither fully understood nor appreciated at this time. And as the audit exercise unfolded it became apparent that the existing structures and reporting lines established for CERTEC and its required outcomes did not facilitate the more inclusive analytical and reflective process required by the HEQC's approach to audit. (Changes for the institution in this regard are detailed later in the section on Improvement Period 1.)

Institutional context also played a role at CityVarsity, where the professional backgrounds, qualifications and interests of staff members differed from those in more traditional universities. It was reported that the emphasis on industry experience (as opposed to academic qualifications) and the fact that, at the time of the audit , many staff members were employed on a part-time basis, limited both interest in the audit and the capacity to engage with its processes.

Time constraints and workload

Management at CityVarsity reported that as the workload increased during this phase, staff questioned the need for the audit and its costs. Preparation for audit put the most strain on middle management (HoDs), who were asked to provide large amounts of documentation and write portfolios for which they had no experience and without any administrative assistance.

The twin issues of time constraints and workload also played out at SU, where the audit process was reported to have produced 'a fault line of serious proportions' between elite researchers and those academic staff who perceived themselves as teachers, with the former being less supportive of the process than the latter. In addition, the case study report for SU shows that the need for staff members to participate in a variety of separate and uncoordinated review and monitoring activities was perceived as further limiting the time staff could give to research and publication activities.

The costs of audit

The financial resources required to support the audit process in institutions were also highlighted in some interviews, especially those where resources had not been included in the institution's original annual budget. For example, it was reported that, after notification of the audit in February 2004, CityVarsity allocated R60,000 to support the process but they soon became aware that this amount did not begin to cover the number of person-hours required. However, while the financial costs of supporting the audit process were not always quantifiable, many interviewees believed these were unavoidable in the first cycle of audit. It was hoped that future audits would build on the progress made in this first cycle and that costs would be reduced.

Audit timelines and deadlines

The effects that the timing of the audit and the added time and workloads had on initial responses to audit have been discussed above. It seems that these effects were aggravated in some institutions by the timelines to which staff members needed to work in the pre-audit phase, and that tight deadlines have implications for both the extent of staff participation and critical reflection.

At CityVarsity, it was reported that notification of the audit was received in February 2004, approximately nine to ten months before the actual audit visit. However, it was also reported that it was not made clear that the deadline for completing and submitting the SER was three months from notification. The resulting rush meant that staff did not have time to reflect on institutional systems and practices. As one staff member said, 'Panic would more accurately describe the preparation experience; reflection takes time and to reflect one has to feel calm'. At CUT, it was reported that the tight timelines meant that the SER submitted to the HEQC had not been circulated institutionally, and at Rhodes that the time and energy needed to complete the SER and prepare for the audit visit had been underestimated.

The importance of learning from previously audited institutions

It seems that during the preparatory phase the institutions included in this study learned useful lessons from the pilot audits of 2003 or the audits in 2004. For example, staff at CUT reported that discussions with staff at the Vaal University of Technology (VUT) had helped them understand certain features of audit better, for example the use of evidence. Similarly, staff at CityVarsity reported that they had learned a lot from Midrand, for example the need to involve as many staff members as possible and to write the report with 'one voice'. A staff member at Rhodes reported that she had sought and received advice from her counterpart at SU and that they had plans to co-author an article on the audit experience.

B.3 DEVELOPING THE SELF-EVALUATION REPORT

This section discusses some elements of the audit process – the criteria, open-ended questions and evidence – that influenced critical reflection and shaped the development of the SER. It begins with a brief description of the processes followed, including the decisions taken as to how to structure this document.

The processes followed

As already indicated Section B.2 above, which highlights the limited participation of staff in developing the SER, the development of this document followed a centrally driven, top-down process in all the institutions, with senior managers deciding what process to follow and middle managers supplying the necessary information and commenting on the accuracy of the drafts. While this might be viewed as a cascading model of participation, it is important to note that the tasks involved in developing the SER differed from those required for responding to a draft document.

At SU, the Rector's Management Team (RMT) decided that the Director of the Academic Planning and Quality Assurance Office should draft the SER 'from the outside in', using the HEQC criteria as the focus and structure. This entailed writing an initial outline of almost 400 pages, and then asking relevant people to provide details related to particular criteria. The Director's was responsible for including all the inputs in subsequent drafts and at the same time reducing the report to the prescribed length. A team of five people, an 'inner circle', made decisions about the process followed and the final format of the report, subject to the approval of the RMT.

The second draft was then circulated to the directors of the support services divisions for comments and additional detail. At this level, the work of responding to the draft was tackled in various ways. In certain cases, senior managers conducted most of the work: some reflected on the quality of their processes, others simply gathered further documents from junior administrative staff. The third draft of the SER included these inputs and was sent to deans and chairs of staff and student organisations who were asked to confirm the accuracy of the report, suggest changes, identify and formulate strengths and weakness in their own contexts and point to plans for addressing those weaknesses. It was at this stage that the deans were also asked to write a two-page response to the four open-ended questions provided by the HEQC.

The fourth draft of the SER was reworked to include these inputs and a fifth draft was sent to the RMT and key committees, after which a sixth draft was written. At this point, the RMT decided to use a narrative structure to treat the themes related to students and their experiences and processes. The seventh and final draft was circulated widely for comment but senior academics reported that by this time 'SER fatigue' had set in and there was little in the way of feedback.

This description confirms that apart from the deans and committee members, the development of the SER did not involve significant numbers of academic staff. Interviewees at SU acknowledged that the approach to audit preparations had been top-down but, with hindsight, thought management had handled the process in an acceptable way.

At UCT, there was a similar commitment not to overburden academic staff. Here, an Institutional Audit Steering Committee (IASC) was established almost a year before the site visit. Besides undertaking the literature review, the IASC identified five proposed outcomes and a number of guiding principles and developed a set of evaluative questions to guide the collection of evidence and compilation of situational analyses by 12 task teams. The conveners of these teams were drawn from the professional and support services and the Centre for Higher Education Development (CHED). The internal evaluation report records that 62 people, of whom only 17 were academics, participated in the task teams. The internal evaluation report records that this approach was taken so as to minimise opposition from academic staff and to encourage their buy-in to audit.

HoDs were then invited to a workshop to comment on the situational analyses and identify strengths and weaknesses in the quality management systems. Academic staff were also invited to comment on the strengths and weaknesses of the institution's core processes. These comments were solicited through the academic association newsletter and were unmediated by the HEQC criteria. It was reported that there were very few responses to this invitation. A further workshop was held with the senior leadership group, including deans, to comment on the first draft of the

SER. Presentations of this draft were also made to the Institutional Forum, the Black Caucus, a group of post-doctoral fellows, and the Postgraduate Student Association to invite feedback from these constituencies. Again, the internal evaluation report records that there were limited responses. This report also suggests that given that the focus of this first audit was largely on management processes, it was perhaps not surprising that more academics did not actively participate in compiling the portfolio. Responses to the post-audit questionnaire indicate that most respondents thought there was an appropriate balance of academic input and bureaucratic support. Finally, as at SU, documents were placed on a specially created website for panellists.

As already mentioned in Section B.2, an APC was appointed at Rhodes towards the end of 2004. Some interviewees included in this study suggested that the members of the committee had been ‘handpicked’ by the Vice-Chancellor and the QAM. In addition, there were some complaints about a retired vice-principal being included to act as consultant on this committee – especially by those who thought he had wielded too much influence over the process. Also, as already indicated, the audit process followed the internal review process where aspects of the audit, such as the HEQC criteria, had already been introduced. While there was consensus amongst interviewees that this arrangement had significantly reduced the workload the audit required of them, it seems that the different agendas of the two processes meant that the work completed for the internal process and its outcomes did not entirely mesh with the objectives of audit.

The work of writing the first draft of the SER was divided among members of the APC. While it was reported that the consultant encouraged them to consider the criteria, the individual writers were left to decide how to complete their own sections of the report. It was reported that some writers had consulted with senior colleagues and members of committees, but that, in most cases, they had worked independently over the December vacation in order to submit a first draft early in January 2005. The first few drafts of the SER were circulated within the APC, after which the QAM and the consultant were responsible for revising the synthesised draft.

At this point, the Vice-Chancellor invited a group of critical readers – both internal and external to the institution – to comment on the document. One reader had been extremely critical not only of the structure of the report but also its tone, which was described as ‘smug and self-congratulatory’. This staff member suggested that the ‘discourse of excellence’ be removed from the final SER, but this suggestion was not taken up. On the other hand, it was reported that other external readers praised both the format and content of the SER.

The final stage of the development of the SER at Rhodes was its circulation to members of the Senate and the Institutional Forum and its publication on the intranet. In addition, a copy was sent to the Mayor of the Makana District Municipality and the Eastern Cape Premier. An advertisement was placed in the local Grahamstown newspaper explaining the HEQC process and inviting comments from the public. These were incorporated in the final draft submitted to the HEQC.

A number of senior academic staff, who had not been members of the APC, confirmed that the process followed had been top-down and that they had had little involvement in the development of the SER. Some of them were quite critical both of the process and the final product. For example, one said that the SER had been written 'to highlight the successes of the past' without 'focusing on the challenges of the future'. On the other hand, there were also reports that many staff members had been pleased with and proud of the SER. These contradictory responses can be explained partly by taking into account individual staff members' different understandings of the SER and its purpose and partly by considering their views on higher education and its relationship with the state.

At CUT, while the QAM was the main driver of the process used to develop the SER, task teams were established to work with the criteria and identify evidence. While certain individuals in these teams reported that they had enjoyed the debates and discussions that their work encouraged, it seems that at a broader institutional level, there was little debate during this phase of audit about what constitutes quality and what contributes to it. As already indicated, many senior staff members viewed the audit as an administrative exercise, responding to the criteria in much the same way as they would to a checklist for a CERTEC evaluation. It seems the developmental value of the SER had not been well understood or communicated at this institution and that, as a result, its potential as a mechanism for reflective thinking and improvement was lost.

At Mancosa, senior staff formed a small task team and held an initial meeting with middle management (HoDs) to outline the process to be followed, identify the estimated dates and deadlines and discuss the audit criteria. In addition, the kinds of evidence expected for each criterion were outlined and responsibilities for preparation delegated. A document confirming these details was also circulated. Some staff members were tasked with gathering and collating evidence, while others worked on drafting the SER. Shortly thereafter, the QAM met with staff members in the various departments who went on to brainstorm ideas for the SER and engage in an internal review process. These reviews formed the basis of further discussions with senior management in which areas of strength and weakness were noted, as well as innovations.

The Director (Academic) was responsible for writing the first draft of the SER, which was presented for discussion to other members of the task team. After this, the team met with HoDs to discuss criteria relating to their specific departments. Issues raised here were then included in the SER. It was reported that the first SER submitted to the HEQC was 'virtually rejected' for being too conversational in tone, too 'criteria driven' and lacking in evidence. Another draft was then prepared for submission by the Director (Research) and the Director (Quality Assurance).

What counts as an appropriate structure for the SER was a topic for considerable discussion at some of the institutions, both in the interviews conducted for this study and, according to interviewees' reports, during this phase of audit itself.

Decisions on the final report structure

At SU, the decision by the RMT to restructure the final draft of the SER along narrative lines following students' experiences and processes at the institution was questioned by a couple of interviewees who thought the report might have been easier to follow had it remained structured around the criteria. Some interviewees also said they would like to know the opinion of the HEQC staff and auditors on this matter.

The structure of the report was viewed as an even bigger issue at Rhodes, where the HEQC criteria were not initially used as a basis for the early drafts of the SER. Quite contradictory views about this decision were expressed during interviews. Some staff saw it as a good decision: they said that it was important that the SER highlight the student experience because this institution, the smallest of the public higher education institutions in this country and one located in a small town in a rural setting, provides something unique for students. It was also reported that, in general, staff were pleased that the institution took ownership of and 'customised' the document, making the process of its development more meaningful to them.

The more critical voices in the institution provided a very different perspective. They saw this decision as a kind of 'cop-out' in that the more narrative style of the report meant that the criteria were not used – and where individuals *had* tried to work with the criteria in developing their sections of the initial drafts of the SER this was reported to be stylistically difficult. One interviewee claimed that the structure of the report was used to sidestep the criteria and to whitewash the weaknesses in the institution.

At CUT it was reported that contributions made by the task teams were not integrated and assimilated into the final SER through numerous drafts as they had been at SU; rather, 'a cut and paste method' was used in assembling this document. The time constraints staff were under meant that the final document was not circulated institutionally for feedback and comments, further weakening possibilities for developing the document and for institutional learning. Some interviewees later recognised that the SER had not captured the unique context of the institution, possibly making it difficult for the audit panel to follow and understand it well.

As indicated at the end of Section B.2, CityVarsity had been advised by Midrand that the SER should speak with one voice, so the Vice-Principal and a senior lecturer took on the primary responsibility for writing the report, based on departmental portfolios of evidence collected by the HoDs. When the initial draft gave too much emphasis to one department, other departments were asked to make further submissions, after which the report was redrafted. It was reported that developing a structure for the report was difficult and time consuming and that following the criteria resulted in repetition; however, feedback from the HEQC on the first submission assisted with the wording, approach and focus of the final report.

While both CUT and the two private institutions would have preferred to have been provided with a template or at least an outline structure for the SER, this was not the case at SU or Rhodes, where interviewees supported the current approach that allows institutions the freedom to decide how to present themselves in this document.

The use of the criteria and open-ended questions

Both the criteria and the open-ended questions provided by the HEQC were reported to have been very useful in developing the SER; however, it is important not to underestimate the difficulties certain staff at some institutions initially experienced in understanding the criteria. In many ways their difficulties here relate to those already outlined in Section B.1, dealing with the terminology associated with audit. In addition, the way the criteria were seen to overlap made it difficult to align evidence with criteria and avoid repetition. Despite these difficulties, it seems that the criteria are beginning to be adopted and used in various internal processes within the institutions.

Understanding the criteria seems to have been particularly difficult for staff members at CityVarsity, where the majority of the staff members are termed 'industry people' – in other words, people who identify themselves as practitioners rather than academics. These people did not easily relate to the criteria – 'It was a foreign language'. Difficulties with terminology were alleviated through workshops run by those staff members who had attended HEQC auditor training sessions.

A senior staff member at this institution reported that, as a result of initial misunderstandings of the criteria, collecting and aligning evidence had also been something of a 'trial and error situation', which meant it had taken more time than anticipated. Senior management often needed to reassure those staff members who felt they had become confused or lost sight of their purpose while conducting the work required in this phase. Besides these difficulties, questions were raised as to whether the criteria were relevant to this institution, with its particular emphasis on creative and practical skills. It was asked whether the criteria were indeed relevant to small, private institutions.

However, despite these initial difficulties, the new language of audit as contained in the HEQC criteria was reported to have been learned and used during the preparation phase. It was also reported that, since the audit, its terms have been adopted institutionally. In this process, the institution's identity and academic voice may have been strengthened. The data suggest that the criteria addressed academic issues a number of staff had highlighted as requiring attention and the audit gave them the opportunity to further lobby for these. The argument was made that a stronger academic voice in the institution provides for a better balance between the need to make a profit and the importance of fulfilling educational goals.

Interestingly, fewer difficulties with the criteria were reported to have been experienced by senior management staff at the other private provider, Mancosa. As mentioned in Section B.1, the relationship between this institution and BCUC of Brunel University had laid a foundation for quality assurance for senior managers. It was noted, however, during interviews conducted for this study, that academic staff who had had limited participation in the pre-audit phase appeared somewhat confused about the criteria. It would seem that their limited participation in preparation activities had hindered their developing similar understandings. As at CityVarsity, some staff members at Mancosa questioned the relevance of some of the criteria for small private institutions.

Staff at CUT reported similar difficulties with the criteria to those raised by staff at CityVarsity – particularly regarding the overlaps between the criteria, which made it difficult to know under which criteria to present evidence. And here, too, it was reported that the criteria are being used in other internal reviews and evaluations and so are becoming embedded in day-to-day operations.

Few difficulties in working with the criteria were reported at SU, where it was mostly senior management and members of the Quality Committee who engaged with these in the early drafts of the SER. Those interviewed agreed that the criteria had helped to focus their attention and organise their thoughts. They confirmed that, despite some initial interpretative differences that sometimes led to confusion, the criteria were well conceived and provided clarity. Where necessary, the Quality Assurance team clarified terminology for staff members.

The main criticism from this institution regarding the criteria was about how SU had used them: it was thought that while the criteria were cogent and provided a framework for the SER, SU had ‘adhered slavishly to them’ in structuring the early drafts of the report. It seems that some people thought the criteria should have been used more as a guide to *developing* content than for actually *structuring* content. This view was not held by all interviewees, some of whom thought it appropriate that the final document kept to a structure which closely reflected the list of criteria so as to facilitate reading and assessment by the panel.

The approach taken at Rhodes in basing the SER on the student experience from the beginning of the process meant that the criteria were not used as carefully here as at SU. A staff member from the QA Office commented that the criteria were quite abstract and difficult to ‘make real’ in everyday functioning. This staff member acknowledged that while the SER followed a logical structure, there was no clear relationship between this document and the HEQC criteria. In addition, it was thought that panel members’ work would have been made easier if the SER had followed the more conventional structure. Finally, questions were raised as to whether the disjuncture between the SER structure and the HEQC criteria had contributed to the panel’s misunderstandings about the institution.

The internal evaluation report at UCT notes that several comments were made about the usefulness of the criteria in making judgments about the quality of higher education institutions, and some about lack of clarity in the definitions or about duplications, especially with regard to Criterion 18, while others questioned the exclusion of some elements of quality assurance systems from the scope of the audit, for example financial management.

In discussing the usefulness of the criteria, a few interviewees warned against the criteria becoming too prescriptive and impacting on academic autonomy and institutional freedom. In addition, they said the criteria should not impinge on the uniqueness of individual institutions. It was also thought that different institutions might interpret the criteria differently, depending on their institutional contexts. It seems that institutions need to work towards achieving a balance between using the criteria as guidelines and being flexible in responding to them, and that any further advice the HEQC might give in helping them to achieve such as balance would be appreciated.

Interview data collected for this study indicated that the criteria were the most important focus in the development of the SER and that the four open-ended questions had been of secondary importance. These four questions were engaged with differently at the various institutions. At times, it was reported that they acted as 'a kind of catch-all' for information not directly related to the criteria themselves. This was reported to have occurred at Rhodes, where the questions were introduced quite late in the process and not woven into the report. At other institutions, this aspect of the process was seen as providing an opportunity to include information that would help auditors understand the unique context of the institution and its specific issues – as one interviewee at SU said, 'It was a way to add the X factor and perhaps brag a bit'.

At SU, as indicated earlier, it was only the deans who were asked to engage with the open-ended questions and to write a two-page response to them. This task was also introduced quite late in process – after some drafts of the SER had already been written. The deans were left to decide how to respond to these questions; some chose to involve senior faculty staff or chairs of departments or both, while others delegated the task to administrative faculty staff. In some cases, the deans wrote the responses themselves without any consultation. It was reported that the tone of some of the first submissions was criticised and respondents were asked to 'state their case rather than defend their position'.

A dean at SU explained that it was only after they had met with an HEQC staff member during the preparation process that they began to understand the importance and value of the open-ended questions. He also commented that this was unfortunate since, had he engaged with them earlier, they might have informed his earlier inputs about the criteria. It appears that engagement with these questions enables individuals to move away from the sense that there is a predetermined checklist of issues (the criteria) with which they need to comply. In addition, as staff did not always have readily available answers, the open-ended questions were reported to encourage greater reflection and new ways of thinking.

At Rhodes, it was reported that the four open-ended questions were addressed only after the main body of the SER had been completed. The responses to these were not incorporated into the SER but included at the end of the document. Despite this approach, those interviewees who had worked with these questions confirmed their usefulness in encouraging reflection on practice and debate about excellence.

The use of evidence

The process of identifying and collecting evidence for the SER was generally described as difficult – except for several staff interviewed at CUT for whom evidence was still understood as the existence of policies, reports and records of which there were reported to be many at this institution. Despite the difficulties experienced, the data suggest that it was in working with evidence that opportunities were provided for many participants to engage with and reflect more deeply on a range of issues and practices and, also, to initiate some of the changes reported later in this section of the report.

A senior management staff member at SU summed up the main difficulties experienced at this institution: first, the need to convey the notion of an evidence-led quality audit to academics who believe that their work already represents high quality, and, second, to interpret the evidence provided. It seems, however, that it was these difficulties that encouraged many interesting debates in this institution, particularly about transformation issues. As one interviewee said, staff had to ‘apply their minds’ in order to produce reliable evidence.

At this institution, the Quality Assurance team had initially tried to coach staff in how to identify and collect evidence but, when this proved a time-consuming task, staff were asked to merely send all the documentation they had collected rather than to make decisions on what constituted evidence for their claims. In discussing the nature of the evidence expected by the HEQC, it was agreed that insufficient information had been given on this aspect of the work required. These responses indicate that providing evidence to substantiate claims about quality arrangements is not a familiar procedure – even for senior academics and managers.

In identifying and collecting evidence at SU, most people initially looked to the policy framework. Later, further data needed to be ‘dug out’ or ‘massaged into the right permutations’. It was reported that the level of decentralisation at SU meant ‘everything was kept in different places’ and that locating evidence was a difficult task. Later in the process, the QAM set up an ‘on-line repository’ for all policies and institutional documents, a step that will facilitate preparations for future audits. Working with evidence also served to highlight gaps in record keeping.

In the end, it was acknowledged that SU provided ‘wheelbarrow loads of paper’ for the auditors. As one interviewee said, ‘If evidence means paperwork, then SU will do well in the audit because it is administratively efficient’. Generally, however, some staff began to realise that administrative efficiency may not be a sufficient condition for ensuring quality.

Interview data collected at Rhodes suggest that there was some contestation over what counted as evidence and when evidence was required. One staff member contended that written policies are not always needed, while another said that in the process of identifying policies for inclusion as evidence they were surprised to find that some had never been implemented. Further comments about this aspect of the process suggested that ‘trust’ is as important as providing evidence (as in “the HEQC needs to trust the institutions and their academics”), and that one should not fix something that ‘ain’t broke’. Many of the comments about evidence mirror the divisions within the institution and the tensions between those who favour audit and those who do not. A staff member commented that the APC did not attempt to encourage the internal debates that arose but concentrated on producing the SER.

During the development of this document the writing team discussed the difference between descriptive and analytical evidence, but found that the identification of evidence to ‘show that something was working’ was the most difficult evidence to find. As another staff member said, ‘It was hard to come up with proof’. Benchmarking and surveys have not been common features of institutional practice at Rhodes and it was acknowledged that the annual Digest of Statistics could be improved. It seems that one of the great benefits of audit at this institution was to develop a better awareness of the importance of evidence and to initiate a culture of documenting, storing, accessing and presenting evidence to support positions and arguments.

Interviewees at CityVarsity reported similar difficulties to those experienced at both SU and Rhodes – in particular, the lack of consistency in record keeping in the various departments in the institution and the problems of distinguishing between evidence and supporting documentation. A staff member described the process of making these distinctions as 'going round in circles' as they changed their minds and reworked reports according to new understandings. In the end, this institution drew on the emphasis given to outcomes and skills-based programmes and provided tangible evidence of the quality of students' work including video footage of live performance, film reels, photographs, students' portfolios and projects as well as documents such as emails and marking schedules.

Another difficulty that arose at this relatively new institution was that a number of processes needed to be documented formally for the first time. As one HoD explained, the pieces of the puzzle had to be put together in order for the institution to be viewed as a whole. A large part of the evidence gathering involved sorting through boxes and servers to locate historical documents. The experience of piecing things together was initially felt to be onerous by the majority of interviewees; however, during the course of data gathering some staff members began to view the process more positively because they began to have a greater sense of what each department was doing. In addition, staff realised that the institution had, in fact, been performing many of the functions associated with audit but that these had not been understood or recorded in the ways required by the HEQC. This insight signalled an important shift in the process at this institution and staff began to feel more confident of their ability to meet the audit criteria.

Staff at CityVarsity mentioned that the process of collecting evidence was helped by the fact that staff had recently been through numerous programme accreditation processes, which meant that a lot of the preparatory work for audit was a reformatting exercise.

Despite the fact that the first SER submitted to the HEQC was described as lacking in evidence, interviewees at Mancosa reported few difficulties with collecting evidence. The collecting was based on the criteria and described as a 'very structured, logical process'. Staff members were assigned certain criteria for which information or evidence, such as minutes of meetings or examination papers, needed to be gathered.

Difficulties that were mentioned by interviewees at this institution included uncertainty as to how much evidence to provide in the SER compared with how much to provide during the audit visit. One staff member revealed that 'in the end we just about provided everything we mentioned in the document'. In addition, another staff member noted that in the final report there was a fair degree of indexing, annexures and cross referencing, which took considerable time to complete.

While the UCT internal evaluation report does not directly discuss the use of evidence in the way it was discussed in the interviews conducted for this study, it records that strong reservations were expressed about the amount of documentation required for the audit and the time required to collect this. This document includes the following comment: 'The HEQC needs to be much stricter about monitoring the amount of documentation requested from institutions. A huge amount of time was spent running around collecting the documents and the panel obviously hadn't engaged with many of these prior to the audit and clearly struggled to find time to read the additional documentation that was provided at the outset of the audit visit.'

The scope of the audit

At SU, some interviewees thought the narrow focus of the audit limited the scope of the exercise and the effectiveness of the process, including the extent to which improvements can be expected. For example, one of them said that excluding the area of finances seriously limited understanding of the ways that improvements and financial capacity are related. At the time of writing this report, it appeared to academics at some of the institutions studied that the HEQC was placing more emphasis on assessing the existence of policies rather than institutional commitment and financial capacity to initiate change. It was being suggested that the second round of audits should be broader in scope.

Another comment from a staff members at this institution about the scope and potential effectiveness of the audit process referred to the way the HEQC excluded the relationship between management and academic staff and other local (institutional) political dynamics from audit. An interviewee explained that there are 'concrete forces at play' and that these need to be confronted and understood if institutions are to make changes. These comments are pertinent when considering the limited changes and developments in certain institutions in the subsequent phases of audit and suggests that while audit may be a springboard or catalyst for change, there are internal factors that need to be in place if these changes are to be implemented and sustained.

The role of the HEQC

The role of the HEQC in providing information about audit and its processes during the pre-audit phase was highlighted in many of the interviews conducted for this study, revealing that information was provided in a variety of ways. At times, it was provided informally. For example, a senior manager at Mancosa spoke of the 'unwavering support' received from an HEQC staff member via telephone and email during this phase of the process. Interviewees highlighted the importance of allaying fears, providing input and reassurance about whether the institution was on track in its preparation, and outlining the HEQC's expectations.

In addition, the value of more formal support was also noted. For example, attendance at the HEQC auditor training sessions was viewed as critical in developing knowledge and understanding of audit. Institutional visits by members of the HEQC were also reported to be most beneficial. For SU, a meeting with a senior HEQC staff member during this period stood out as an important event in clarifying the developmental nature of the audit and the benefits of self-evaluation, and allaying people's fears and suspicions about state interference. It was reported that SU staff left the meeting feeling confident they could persuade their colleagues that the HEQC audit was a worthwhile exercise.

Similarly, two early meetings with staff from the HEQC prior to the audit were described as very important by a staff member at Rhodes, who said this was the first time staff at this institution had been able to 'put a face to the HEQC' and discover that it was 'not some big bureaucratic body, like SAQA'. Instead, at that briefing meeting they saw 'something different' – people who themselves had a university background, people who listened and responded well to questions and people who 'talk like us'. Not all these positive perceptions were sustained into the next phase, however. For example, a senior manager said that, in retrospect, he thought the HEQC staff who had attended this meeting had given a false impression of the HEQC's approach to audit: they emphasised a developmental approach and encouraged Rhodes to be honest and open about their challenges, but the site visit did not live up to expectations and was experienced by some staff as much more 'adversarial'.

Finally, written guides were also mentioned as important. It was reported that the HEQC did not send 'the manual' to Rhodes, which was perhaps an oversight; however, this document had been received by a staff member who had attended an auditors' training workshop and they had been able to work from this.

B. 4 *THE EFFECTIVENESS AND EFFICIENCY OF THE AUDIT PROCESS IN THE PRE-AUDIT PHASE*

This section evaluates the effectiveness and efficiency of the processes followed during the pre-audit phase – a phase that required considerable attention, albeit by a limited number of staff members in each of the institutions included in the study.

Effectiveness

The effectiveness of the processes followed in the pre-audit stage may be judged in a number of ways. The data collected in this study allow judgements to be made by focusing on the participation of institutional staff, their engagement in the process of developing the SER and their engagement with each other, and the extent of critical self-reflection undertaken. The effect of participation and engagement may be understood by considering the changes – both conceptual and those of a more material nature – reported to have taken place in these institutions during this time. Finally, the extent to which individual learning had translated into institutional learning could be examined.

Participation and engagement

Participation in the audit process was limited in all the institutions included in this study, especially the larger public institutions, the primary SER developers being senior managers, with middle managers merely collecting documents and commenting on drafts. Some of the staff who participated in these activities restricted their work to those areas that affected them or to certain criteria that interested them. Even when the final SER reports were made available on the intranet at the institutions, it was reported that very few staff members had read the entire final document.

The data indicate that participation, itself, does not necessarily lead to in-depth engagement and self-reflection. This was found to be the case particularly where the developmental purpose of the audit was not well understood. Two examples stand out –CUT and Rhodes. At CUT, engagement tended to be more superficial and technical, following a compliance approach rather than critical analysis. And even where a more bureaucratic approach was taken, gaps and weaknesses in policy and practice were noted and changes were made, as described later in this section. One of the more critical voices at Rhodes described the audit as a lost opportunity for many staff in this institution because 'Rhodes did not learn about itself'. The staff member who viewed the report as a 'whitewash' rather than an honest assessment of the institution thought that many staff members had gone through the process only because they understood audit to be linked to meeting policy requirements and to resource allocation.

Lack of participation was not only the result of limited understanding, however. Even where the purpose of audit was understood and welcomed, staff participation in the initial phase was limited – and, in some cases, quite deliberately so. UCT and SU provide good examples of this.

Furthermore, in some institutions, staff participation might be better described as staff 'resistance' rather than engagement. Such resistance took various forms: ideological (the increasing role of the state in steering higher education was seen to reduce the autonomy of institutions and the freedom of academics); practical (time constraints and additional workloads); dismissive (the audit being of little interest and the HEQC a passing phenomenon) – or a combination of all of these. Increasing staff participation and managing the causes of resistance is a vital issue for the HEQC to consider for future audits.

However, despite the limited participation in the pre-audit phase, it is clear that the work undertaken did have important effects and that changes occurred in all the institutions included in this study. These are outlined in the following sections.

Changes in conceptual understandings

The pre-audit phase was identified by many interviewees as being very important for helping staff – albeit only a limited number – develop a new understanding of what audit is for and how it works. While there was a significant shift in the way staff at institutions such as CityVarsity that did not have much prior knowledge of audit understood it, there were also shifts at institutions such as SU that did.

In some institutions, the debates and discussions in the pre-audit phase also gave staff a deeper understanding of higher education as a sector as well as of the individual institutions at which they worked. For example, at Rhodes the debates on the extent to which the institution should identify itself with national goals and act as an agent of the state became widespread during this phase. An interviewee at SU said the audit encouraged staff to ‘dig deeper in the institutional psyche’, while at CityVarsity interviewees highlighted the tensions between the academic and business voices. At Mancosa there was consensus that the preparation period fostered thinking about critical and strategic issues. For example, staff debated whether the institution should continue to expand rapidly and consider itself a competitor to larger education providers, or whether it should consolidate its current position. If debates and discussions can be seen as an indicator of self-reflection, then it seems self-reflection was initiated at all these institutions.

At SU, it was reported that two important developments resulted from the debates and discussions about the role and structure of the Quality Committee. Firstly, this committee is no longer viewed as being merely representative, but is seen as a means of encouraging wider participation in quality matters; and, secondly, a new awareness of how committees fit into and contribute to the institutional system has developed. For example, the SU case study report records that a senior staff member suggested that during the audit preparations ‘many academics came to understand the role of Academic Support and what it meant to them. Likewise, support staff became more aware of the complexities of the work of academics. It seems that people developed new ways of thinking about the university as a system and realised the benefits of working together’. Such comments suggest that institutional learning began during this phase and that this may be a necessary first step before improvements can be introduced.

The need to manage institutional knowledge so that it can be accessed by staff was an important lesson learned at Mancosa, where a senior manager said, ‘We are more conscious of the need to have evidence and so the need for putting structures into place where evidence is collated on an ongoing basis – knowledge management kind of structures which we are now building into our IT processes as well’. Another positive spin-off of the audit, reported at both CityVarsity and Mancosa, was the increased collegiality across departments. Working with staff from other departments in the pre-audit phase seems to have fostered discussions and broken down barriers so that departments no longer work in isolation.

The UCT internal evaluation report records that the preparation phase enabled some participants to engage in critical self-reflection and that, in doing so, they came to better understand the institution itself. For example, a questionnaire respondent wrote: ‘Reading through self-assessment resulted in a better perspective of major issues UCT is grappling with and a clearer view of how my own efforts are impacting on these issues’, and another spoke of ‘stepping back and taking a broad, fresh look at important areas of activity, and the QA systems surrounding them’.

Finally, there is some evidence to suggest that new understandings of quality and quality assurance were being developed at some, but not all, institutions during the pre-audit stage. Here it seems that the need to identify and interrogate evidence was a key activity that led to debates and discussions on these topics. For example, a staff member at SU said that during this period it became clear that staff could no longer rely only on their past reputations or that of the institution; however, the 'paper trail' at this institution is now reported to be more comprehensive than ever, suggesting that changes in understanding do not always lead to changes in practice.

While the pre-audit stage for CUT brought about a new understanding of the *importance* of introducing quality assurance arrangements, the understanding of *how* quality can be assured was still largely limited to the need to have policies and procedures in place. As already mentioned, to some extent this understanding arose out of the CERTEC approach to quality assurance, which tended to encourage a culture of compliance rather than critical engagement. The CUT case study indicates that the understanding of quality and quality arrangements deepened as staff went through the subsequent stages of audit and that it is still being grappled with at this institution, which suggests that it was only once staff attempted to *implement* quality assurance arrangements that they began to understand them better.

Institutional improvements

It was not always easy to pinpoint the timing and origin of improvements and relate them to the audit process. The time lapse between the audit and this study meant that many interviewees were unable to recall the exact chronology of events and so were unable to say which improvements had begun during this pre-audit period; not all new ideas for improvements developed during this period were actually implemented during this period – some were only implemented once the HEQC Audit Report had been received; and it was often reported that the need for some of the improvements had been recognised by staff prior to the audit. It seems reasonable, however, to suggest that the audit provided a lever for change and supported changes identified prior to audit. Staff made use of the opportunity provided by the audit to 'pull together' existing documents, create new documents (converting policies to manuals) and 'formalise' ways of conducting reviews and assessments.

Identifying and collecting evidence appears to have been a valuable process for highlighting gaps in institutional systems, policies and procedures, which meant that changes in these areas were fast-tracked during this period. This was the case at both CityVarsity, a relatively new, small private institution, and SU, a large, well-established university. At the former, centralised administrative and record-keeping systems were introduced along with new programme development and assessment procedures which supported the emergence of a stronger academic voice in this institution. A significant lesson learnt during the pre-audit phase was that the informal systems and practices previously followed in some departments needed to be made explicit. In this way, the institution began to share internally its good practices and develop broader institutional self-knowledge.

At SU, policies for the acceptance of PhD candidates, the appointment of external examiners, and procedures for assessment were reported to have been developed during this time. A staff member contended that the HEQC audit was 'used as a tool to push policy through', and a senior academic believed that issues of diversity and equity received increased attention during the development of the SER. For example, high-achieving black staff members were given a meritorious salary increase in response to the criteria on the retention of black staff, and a student noted that signage around the university only became trilingual just before the audit visit, even though policy for this had been approved as early as 2002.

The UCT internal evaluation report records that task teams were established during the preparation phase to develop institutional policies for RPL (Recognition of Prior Learning) and Continuing Education, and to accelerate the processes of refining, updating and documenting research related policies. In addition, a student climate survey was conducted on students' views of the quality of core processes at UCT. The evaluation report also states that while it is possible to point to other changes that happened prior to audit, the need for these changes had already been identified internally prior to the publication of the final audit criteria.

The implementation of improvements did not always happen as expected, however. For example, at SU the earlier 'mock audit' had resulted in a list of 38 issues that required attention. This list was included in the SER, but when a progress report on activities related to this list was requested by the HEQC prior to the audit visit, it was clear that little had actually been achieved. When reflecting on the reasons for this, it was found that responsibilities for addressing these issues had not been delegated: in effect, the issues had been identified but not owned. It was reported that the list of issues would be revisited in a special meeting to be held in June 2006 and that responsibilities for these issues would be allocated according to line functions rather than being left to be dealt with by collegial structures such as committees. The language used in the data collected here suggest that there may be shifts from the former collegial structures to more managerial structures. Another lesson was learned here: it became clear that wider staff participation would be required in the development of the Quality Improvement Plan if it was to be effective, a key theme developed later in this report.

Areas for change identified during this phase of the audit at Mancosa included the formalisation of meetings, the establishment of new governance structures, the upgrading of some areas of the infrastructure, and the improvement of the staff profile in terms of diversity and equity. In addition, it was reported that the need to plan and implement budgets more carefully, to standardise record keeping across departments and to document decision making processes was recognised. Finally, a student committee was established to provide a formal channel of communication between students and management.

Many staff members at Rhodes reported that they did not identify any new areas for improvement during this phase and that there had been 'no special policy push' during this time. However, during the earlier academic review process, 19 areas for improvement had been identified, particularly those related to the residences, student experiences and the development of the curricula in terms of new assessment criteria. There were debates about issues of transformation and widening research participation, but no new initiatives were reported. A number of interviewees did mention that transformation was seen as the main agenda of the HEQC audit and was described as a 'predictable result' in the Audit Report.
The importance of tracking changes needs to be noted here, since the introduction of new policies

does not in itself mean there have been improvements. This issue is raised again in Section D.2, the final section of this report.

Efficiency

The time and attention needed for preparations in the pre-audit phase, and some of the consequences for individual staff members and the institution as a whole, have been detailed in this section of the report. The need to streamline the audit process and reduce its costs (both financially and in terms of person-hours) were key recommendations made in many of the interviews conducted for this study. It was suggested that the HEQC should present institutions with a best practice model rather than leave institutional staff to figure out by themselves the solutions to the difficulties they experienced. Certainly, further guidelines on the content and format of the SER and the type and amount of evidence required seem to be necessary to help institutions understand what is expected of them. Comments about the structure of the SER indicate that institutional staff would like to better understand how the panel reads these reports, and how the HEQC reads one institutional report against another. Alternative approaches to quality assurance such as benchmarking and the greater use of HEMIS (Higher Education Management Information System) data were also suggested as ways to streamline preparations.

Streamlining the audit process was seen to be particularly important for the small private institutions which have fewer staff members and whose staff tend to carry multiple responsibilities. It was suggested that the audit and accreditation processes might be completed together in these institutions.

The time and energy required of certain individuals during the pre-audit phase may have other negative spin-offs. For example, at CUT it was reported that because there was so much work to be done in coming to grips with putting together a SER for the first time, a number of projects had to be 'put on the back burner' until after the audit.

Despite the fact that a number of changes were mentioned at most the institutions included in this study, the *extent* of institutional change was debated. For example, at CUT interviewees questioned whether the introduction of new policies and structures had really changed their institution's culture or operational style. In addition, while there was agreement on the *fact* of change at other institutions, there were different understandings about its *rate*. At SU, a few respondents cautioned that change does not happen easily here, and said that major change will require 'a big mind shift'. Until this happened, it was anticipated that SU will merely 'add on rather than change'.

PHASE TWO: THE SITE VISIT

This section of the report follows the chronology of the audit visit itself, from the preparation done by institutional staff and by the panel and its members, to the process followed in the interview sessions and finally the oral feedback provided on the last day. The section concludes by considering the effectiveness and efficiency of this phase.

B. 5 PREPARATION FOR AND ANTICIPATION OF THE SITE VISIT

As might be expected, preparations for the site visit required careful planning and coordination. Prior to the visit itself, interviewees for the panel sessions needed to be selected and briefed, and venues had to be arranged and documentation collated. The sense of anticipation that developed during this time added to the pressures felt at some of the institutions. Certain interviewees for this study acknowledged that, in retrospect, they had ‘over-prepared’ for the interview sessions. This was particularly thought to be the case at SU. While the full details of their preparations can be read in their case study report, it is useful to highlight aspects of the process followed at this institution, as the extent of its preparations provides a framework in which to incorporate issues experienced at other institutions.

The selection of interviewees

The identification of interviewees at SU was completed initially by using a cascading model where the QAM asked members of the Rector’s Management Team (RMT) and the deans to identify people who were considered knowledgeable about the institution and who had strong opinions about particular issues. They, in turn, asked their staff and contacts to identify additional interviewees. In some cases volunteers were asked for, and for some of the sessions interviewees self-selected themselves on account of their positions and membership of committees. Some senior managers interviewed for this study reported that the QAM provided guidelines on how to assemble interview groups so as to ensure that participants would be able to answer the questions posed in the sessions and would be representative of the variety of perspectives held at SU.

Similar processes were followed at the other institutions. For example, the Rhodes case study report records that the identification and selection of interviewees was a centrally driven process, with the QAM and the Vice-Chancellor having the most say in the selection process, although certain interviewees were selected by virtue of their positions and membership of committees. An interviewee at Mancosa said that their management selected interviewees who would be able to ‘give a balanced and articulate view of the institution’, while others were appointed on the basis of their knowledge and expertise.

Identifying eight people to fill some of the sessions was reported to be difficult in most of the institutions included in this study – especially in the institutions that attempted to take racial and gender diversity into account, and in the small private institutions with their smaller staff complements. A senior manager interviewed at CityVarsity was of the opinion that the audit process had been designed for large public institutions and that it ‘falls flat’ in smaller private providers – especially where certain staff members carry multiple roles and responsibilities. As suggested in the previous section, it may be necessary to consider a more appropriate approach to audit for these institutions – perhaps one that works closely alongside the programme accreditation process.

Another difficulty was identifying sufficient numbers of external stakeholders willing to participate in these sessions. A staff member at Mancosa reported that, in some instances, telephone interviews rather than face-to-face interviews had been conducted with both external stakeholders and students living at a distance to accommodate this requirement.

The process of identifying students for participation in the audit was reported to be extensive at SU. Student leaders at this institution identified, invited and briefed students for their sessions. Again, diversity in race and gender was a priority in selecting students, as was the inclusion of critical voices. It was reported that the biggest challenge was to ensure that the selected students arrived for the interviews and in some instances replacements had to be found at the last minute. The students interviewed for this study confirmed that student participation was difficult to achieve because students do not see audit as a priority for them.

Preparation and coordination of interviewees

Preparation of the interviewees followed their selection. At SU, an Audit Visit Coordinating Committee (CC) consisting of nine staff members and five students was appointed to coordinate many audit activities. This committee sent a personalised invitation to each person identified for inclusion in the interview sessions, with information about the date, time and location of their session(s), a hard copy of the SER, the criteria used to select participants, the name of the RMT member, Dean or Director who had selected them, the theme of the session, the HEQC audit criteria relevant for the session, and the list of people to be interviewed on the panel with them. To ensure that people attended the interviews, the CC sent sms notifications the evening before interviews were scheduled, to remind participants of the time, venue and so on. An Excel spreadsheet was developed and used to track staff to be interviewed in the various panels, along with the venues and times of their sessions. A member of this committee estimated that almost 800 people were contacted during this period.

The preparation of interviewees and coordination of activities for the audit visit appeared to have been more complicated in the larger institutions than the smaller ones. Working through the night, the CC at SU set up the interview venues, indexed the documents collected and housed in the library, confirmed times and venues with interviewees and found replacements for those staff not available. As indicated earlier, similar pressures were reported at Rhodes where the coordination process was described as a ‘logistical nightmare’, especially when there were 50 people being interviewed simultaneously in parallel sessions. The UCT internal evaluation report also records that ‘it required two people working pretty much full time for four weeks and two additional people working almost full time for a whole week to finalise the interview list’.

Formal briefing sessions about the site visit were also a part of the preparation process at some institutions. At SU, an ‘Interviewee Briefing Document’ was developed and given to all interviewees. This document provided the background to the HEQC audit and information on the panel members, listed the main documents on display, outlined what to expect in the interview itself, explained how to prepare and add value to the process, suggested what not to do, and provided a map showing the main venue for the sessions and giving directions how to get there. It was reported that this was the first time the majority of interviewees had engaged with the SER. To prepare students, information sessions were held at the student residences and also at other venues for off-campus students.

Interviewees for this study reported that at the briefing sessions they had been encouraged to be honest and responsible and to provide a balanced view of the institution. At SU, interviewees were also warned to expect ‘blank stares’, no debate and even the passing of notes between panel members. A staff member commented that these earlier warnings had significantly reduced his irritation levels when these things had indeed occurred.

At Rhodes a public briefing session was held a week before the site visit. Here the QAM, the Vice-Chancellor, the external consultant and the Director of Academic Development briefed interviewees by providing background to the HEQC audit process, its purpose, anticipated benefits to the institution and some sense of what could be expected in the interview sessions. Interviewees were informed about the process of triangulation but were also encouraged to speak their minds. Documentation disseminated included a copy of the SER and a letter outlining the programme, interview times and venues, and information about the panellists. An interviewee at this institution commented that the briefing process did not engage interviewees in any reflective work or encourage them to consider how they might improve their own areas of practice. Some interviewees suggested that they had needed to learn the SER in order to frame the right responses to questions, and one said that there was a sense that participants would be ‘slapped over the wrists for exposing flaws and weaknesses’ – a comment which contradicts other reports that said staff members had been encouraged to speak their minds.

At some institutions it was reported that late communications from the HEQC had left insufficient time to complete preparations. For example, it was reported at SU that the final programme had been received about three weeks before the site visit, and at CUT that the dates of the audit visit had been confirmed only three weeks prior to the visit. A staff member at Rhodes suggested that this institution had also needed more time to work with the interview schedule before the visit. Ensuring that all interviewees, especially external stakeholders, were well briefed in the time allowed proved difficult in some institutions.

Despite the preparations described above, fears about the focus and tone of the interviews persisted in the run-up to the site visit. At SU, many interviewees said they had expected to be asked difficult questions, particularly about language, equity and transformation. Some felt anxious about this as they believed SU had not made sufficient progress in these areas. The same concerns about transformation issues were reported at Rhodes. At CityVarsity, the anticipated language barriers between the staff and the panel members heightened tensions, and at Mancosa, interviewees needed to be reassured that ‘this was not an interrogation process, [but] a very democratic process’.

The role of the HEQC during preparations

Although some difficulties with timelines were reported, in general, and as was found in the previous phase of audit, staff interviewed for this study reported that the continuing liaison with HEQC staff was important and useful. The key recommendation made for improving the process during the preparatory phase was the involvement of additional institutional staff in meetings and workshops with HEQC staff. More specifically, it was recommended that all institutional staff should be given an opportunity to attend workshops where the criteria were discussed and the use of evidence explained. The data suggest it was thought that the HEQC would be better able to sensitise staff to the purposes and processes of audit and its terminology than the institutional staff themselves, and that a dedicated HEQC staff member assigned to the institution approximately six months before the audit to work alongside institutional staff would be helpful in dispelling the view that 'the panel are the judges and the university stands accused'. Some of the data presented suggest that the panel interview approach had been something of a surprise to some participants and this supports the view that further preparations may be needed.

Although these suggestions were made, interviewees also raised the question of the sustainability of the current approach to audit and acknowledged that the HEQC's own resources and capacity were already stretched. If the HEQC were to implement the suggestions made here, it would probably be necessary to employ additional staff.

Communication gaps between the HEQC and institutional staff were noticed in some institutions. For example, some staff said they were still unclear about how successful institutional audits would lead to self-accreditation status and influence funding. It seems that further information is needed about how this will happen, because the lack of clarity has given rise to concerns that audit will lead to institutions being graded.

B. 6 THE PANEL INTERVIEWS

This section focuses on the panel interview sessions and begins by outlining interviewees' comments about the panel members' overall preparation and the usefulness of the panel interview approach. Here, factors such as the tone and style of the interview sessions, the panel size, time constraints and the selection of interviewees were raised as factors that influenced the efficiency and effectiveness of this phase of audit. The extent to which the questions posed in interviews took the institutional context into account and the appropriateness of the lines of inquiry followed are also key issues in this section. Finally, interviewees' views of the role of the HEQC staff in the interview sessions and the oral feedback and close to the site visit are discussed.

The overall preparation by the panel members

The data suggest that, overall, the preparations undertaken by the institution to be audited were matched by the preparations undertaken by the panel members. Generally, there was very high praise for the panel members – their own knowledge about higher education and their expertise, their engagement with the SER, their insight into the core issues it presented, and their professional conduct in the interview sessions. A staff member at SU was so impressed with the panel that he described the visit as ‘a donation to the university because it allowed SU to access the top brains in the sector for an entire week’. Similarly, senior managers at both the small private providers expressed appreciation for the respect accorded their institutions and the knowledge shared with them.

The impressive work of the chair was noted by some interviewees. For example, at SU the chair was described as having conducted and controlled the entire interview process in an exemplary manner. He was also described as insightful and able to ‘zoom in on the important issues’. The leadership and control exerted by the chair was also noted by interviewees as Mancosa. The important role of the chair is again highlighted in the later sub-section dealing with the tone and style of the interview sessions and in Section C in which the comments of auditors who were interviewed about their role are discussed.

However, as in the pre-audit stage, some contradictions to the positive responses were noted. The most serious of the criticisms raised were those from staff at Rhodes, a number of whom reported that in its preparation the panel did not seem to have come to grips with aspects of the SER and the unique context of this institution, including its approach to quality assurance. It was reported that many staff members had thought the SER had provided a clear description of how the quality assurance system worked and had been proud of this document. As explained earlier in this report, the structure of the SER at this institution did not follow the HEQC criteria and this approach to presenting information may have made it difficult for the HEQC to clearly identify institutional structures and processes described. In addition, a senior manager at Rhodes suggested that since most of the panel members were located at larger public institutions, they may have found it difficult to follow the ‘more collegial’ approach used at Rhodes. A further comment from an interviewee at Rhodes was that the panel that visited this institution had been ‘uneven’ in that while ‘there were people who knew what they were doing’, others seemed to be out of their depth and were appointed simply to ‘warm up seats’.

The case study for Rhodes notes that the contradictory responses from interviewees at this institution were further complicated by the timing of the interviews for this study. The Audit Report had arrived at the institution shortly before the interviews for this study were conducted, which meant that, in some cases, responses to the questions may have been influenced by some staff members’ negative responses to the Report. This point was also highlighted by a staff member who said he had noted that while some institutional staff had expressed satisfaction with the audit process and the panel immediately after the audit visit, they had begun to complain about the inadequacy of the panel members after receiving the Report if they had not agreed with criticisms or recommendations made in this document. This comment further supports the view that evaluative interviews should be staggered across the phases of audit rather than conducted once only.

A similar criticism of the panel’s preparations was raised at other institutions, where there were reports that not all the panel members had participated in the interview sessions with the same degree of interest and enthusiasm and that, in some cases, panel members were learning about certain aspects of audit as they engaged in it – for example, internationalisation. Another comment was that a panel member 'punched above his weight', suggesting that he lacked the experience and expertise to be there.

In some institutions, it was reported, panel members did not appear open to learning about different institutional contexts and ways of operating by giving greater consideration to the responses they heard. This was particularly the case at Rhodes, where an interviewee said he thought that panel members had been expecting specific responses to questions, and that they appeared satisfied if and when these were given, but when unexpected responses were made did not adequately engage with them. Later comments about the HEQC's influence on the panel at this institution are important in further understanding this last comment.

The inclusion and participation of international auditors was commented on by just a few interviewees. One person contended that such auditors 'just don't see things the same way'. This comment was made with particular reference to the language issues at SU, where it was said that English mother tongue speakers were 'secure in their power and don't understand minority language issues'. In other cases, the international auditors were viewed as providing important input in respect of both content (e.g. internationalisation) and approach (e.g. setting an example for the tone and style of interviews.)

The use of panel interviews as the main method of audit

The extent to which an audit panel can really understand an institution through conducting interview sessions over one week was questioned by some interviewees. Those who raised questions said that the visit merely skimmed the surface of the institution rather than ensuring that panel members gained a good understanding of how it worked. Some interviewees suggested that auditors need to visit additional sites on campuses and to speak to larger numbers of 'ordinary staff' (especially the lecturers) in order to broaden their understandings. Other comments made by interviewees for this study picked up on the issue of limited staff participation in the panel interviews, especially among staff at the lower levels of the institutions. Once again, these comments suggest that staff may not have fully understood the purpose of the audit visit and the interview sessions.

A recommendation made for future audit visits was that the institution be given 15 to 30 minutes to make an initial presentation before the interviews started. It was suggested that this would help the institution to feel an equal partner in the process and break down some of the initial psychological barriers.

Another recommendation was about the use of directed questions, i.e. questions that are directed at specific individuals. As will be elaborated on later in this section, there were a number of concerns about the way these were handled and how they also closed down opportunities for engagement. It was recommended that panel interviews should include a greater number of open questions which any interviewee present might answer.

Certainly, the data suggest that interview sessions have a number of potential pitfalls, including sessions being dominated by particular individuals and failure to ensure that appropriate individuals were questioned. In addition, a SRC representative said that she had felt she needed to be 'loyal' to the institution when she was interviewed along with staff members. She reported that she had felt more comfortable about speaking her mind when interviewed alongside other students.

The data collected for this study also suggest that interview sessions cannot easily be standardised and that they may develop a life of their own depending on who is participating. For example, at Rhodes an HoD described two different experiences of the two interview sessions in which she had participated. She said that she had enjoyed the session with women researchers as it was more of a discussion and less of a question-and-answer session. She reported that there had been a great exchange of ideas and that she had felt optimistic and upbeat when she left the interview. On the other hand, this same HoD reported that the session with HoDs in one faculty had been completely different – more formal and, predictably, male-dominated. She said that she had become quite frustrated during this session because the more established and forceful HoDs had dominated discussions. She also reported that there had not been time to explore issues and that she had had the sense that the chair of this session had been simply trying to 'get through' a list of questions.

The data also suggest that in some sessions the intent of triangulation virtually fell away. For example a Master's student reported that in her session she had been offered a lot of advice about what she should be doing as a student at this level. This had helped her see what additional support her institution ought to be giving her but did not serve the purpose of the audit, ie providing information to the panel.

The UCT internal evaluation report records that 38 percent of respondents to the post-audit questionnaire agreed that the interviews had added value to UCT's own self-evaluation exercise, 29 percent were not sure and 27 percent disagreed. The data found in this internal evaluation report serve to confirm the data provided in the interviews conducted at the other institutions included in this study. Most of the negative perceptions related to the manner in which the interviews were structured, the limited time of the interviews, the perceived bias of some of the panellists, the nature of the questions and the limitations on the degree of openness of the panellists to learning how UCT itself defined its challenges and priorities. Positive feedback related to the extent to which panellists had conducted the interviews in a professional manner which encouraged discussion and participation and asked pertinent and incisive questions which increased institutional staff members' understanding of particular issues UCT was grappling with and challenges it was facing.
At Rhodes, a number of staff remarked that they had gained more from the internal academic review process than from the institutional audit. A staff member who had been involved in both the audit and the MBA and MEd reviews at this institution said that the audit had been far more 'harrowing' in spite of the stakes not being as high. She thought that her experience of the smaller group sessions with subject specialists had offered a more collegial process than the audit panel sessions had done.

The tone and style of the interview sessions

The panel was generally given high praise for the way they prepared for and conducted the interview sessions, but the very formal approach they adopted and the overall tone of the interview sessions were questioned by a number of interviewees at some, but not all, of the institutions included in this study. Of the two small private providers, it was only staff members at CityVarsity who argued that this approach, at times experienced as patronising and setting up an 'us and them' dynamic, may have limited possibilities for reflection and further learning. As one interviewee said, staff were so focused on answering the questions in an acceptable manner they had little opportunity to reflect. For some participants, this made the interviews rather a disappointment.

The formality of these sessions also had the effect of making some interviewees unnecessarily nervous; however, once the process was under way (from the second day onwards), it was reported that both staff and panel members relaxed a little, enabling the former to engage more openly and to elaborate on their responses to questions raised.

While some staff at Mancosa also commented on the sometimes stilted nature of the interview sessions, in general they seemed to have appreciated the need for formality more than those at CityVarsity; nevertheless, certain comments suggested that they had worked hard in the initial stages of the visit 'to create the right ethos between the panel and ourselves'. The most important criticism raised at this institution was that there had been a deviation from anticipated procedure in that some staff members were interviewed individually in addition to participating in group interviews. It was reported that this issue was addressed satisfactorily when queried at that time.

At the traditional universities, there were different views on the manner in which interview sessions were held. The most serious criticisms again came from a number of staff members at Rhodes, where the panel members' conduct on the first two days was experienced as 'hostile' and their tone as 'accusatory'. One dean suggested that both the institutional staff and the panel members had been nervous and that this had led to 'a degree of posturing on both sides'. It was also reported that in the first two days many interviewees began to feel defensive and that one even offered to resign if requested to do so. The earlier descriptions of the audit process as a developmental exercise were questioned as staff felt that they were being rapped over the knuckles. Yet another comment was about institutional staff feeling they were in a court rather than with colleagues. Clearly, there were sensitivities about the way questions were phrased. At the end of the second day, the Vice-Chancellor intervened and met with both the chair and a senior HEQC staff member to explain the concerns that had arisen. It was reported that after this there was a marked improvement, especially when the panel split up and there were opportunities for smaller group discussions – 'academics talking to academics and getting to the heart of the issues'.

At this institution it was also reported that some staff members had been surprised by the depth of the probing during interview sessions. Not all interviewees were unhappy about this – some reported that they had enjoyed the challenge – but once again it seems that the approach taken came as something of a surprise and that not all staff had been sufficiently prepared for the process.

The tone of interviews was also an issue raised in the UCT internal evaluation report: some respondents felt the tone of questions had been inspectorial and confrontational rather than collegial.

It has already been mentioned that the chair plays a crucial role in setting the right tone for the interviews. At Rhodes, there were different perceptions of the way the chair handled the introductions. While one interviewee said that 'the chair was impressive', another felt that the tone used to institutional staff in describing the process to be followed may have influenced the way interviewees responded to the process as a whole. This interviewee explained that that it was not so much *what* was said (after all, they understood the time constraints under which the panel was working and also the purpose of the interviews), but rather the *way* it was said.

At SU, interviewees had no complaints about the way panel members engaged with them. They said they understood that not interacting with staff helped the panel to remain impartial and keep the necessary distance to ensure the success of the process and prevent undue interference and influence from the SU community.

Generally, however, and for a significant number of interviewees in this study, the formality of the interview sessions had the effect of closing down opportunities for discussion and debate, frustrating some participants and angering others, especially when they thought that good responses to questions could have been elicited if instead of directing questions to only one interviewee others in the group had been given the opportunity to respond.

Associated with the issue of style and tone are three further factors which impinged on staff satisfaction with the interview sessions – the size of the interview panels in some sessions, the time allowed for each session, and the selection of participants for these sessions.

Panel size, time constraints, selection of interviewees

As already indicated, comments made by a number of interviewees suggest that they had hoped for more of a conversation, and a greater sharing of ideas with panel members; instead, the imbalance in numbers in some sessions and the time allowed for discussing the questions limited such opportunities. For example, at SU some senior managers said they were unhappy that, on the first day, there had been 16 people on the panel and only eight people from SU. They believed this had created unnecessary tension that inhibited engagement and frank discussion.

Time constraints in the programme meant that panellists had to move quickly from one topic to another, further limiting opportunities for discussion and reflection. It was also reported that engagement was further limited when interview participants were a mixed group of staff members from various faculties and departments. These comments suggest that participants' expectations of the interview sessions were not always in line with the HEQC's intentions for these sessions and that they may not have had a good understanding of the purpose of the interviews. This may be an area of weakness in the audit preparation process as well as in the guidelines provided to institutional staff before the site visit.

The HEQC may want to consider how some of the interview sessions could work differently in future audits so as to provide opportunities for initiating more focused and in-depth discussions. It was suggested that one way this could be done would be by including staff members from the same programmes in these sessions rather than from different ones. For example, the CUT case study report records that 'a group of four or five staff talking about their particular programme would provide a far better picture of educational practice, and an understanding of how the programmes were developing, than a group of four or five individuals from different programmes and on different academic levels'. Despite this suggestion, it seems that mixed groupings did have positive spin-offs as staff learned about practices within their own institutions as a whole. The following section highlights the appreciation recorded by institutional staff when there was deeper engagement about specific issues and dilemmas.

Institutional context and lines of inquiry

A good understanding of the unique institutional context appears to be critical in both developing appropriate lines of inquiry and identifying appropriate institutional staff members to whom to address questions in interview sessions. The data also suggest that developing this understanding may not be quite as simple or straightforward as reading up an institution's history, vision and mission – or the available statistics. More than this, it requires developing an understanding of how the institution is structured and how positions, roles and responsibilities have developed.

As indicated earlier, staff at Rhodes did not feel that either the context of their institution or its quality assurance system had been well understood by the panel. Some interviewees also reported that the collegial culture enjoyed at this institution had not been appreciated – and they reported that the emphasis given to a more managerial culture had been noted with surprise. In addition, the lines of inquiry for the first two days were described as being overly focused on issues of strategy and transformation. As a result, for people in these sessions, the audit was experienced as being 'about transformation' and therefore somewhat limited in its scope. Their experience in this regard fuelled further debates about the HEQC's agenda and its relationship with the state. Further criticisms raised by interviewees at Rhodes included the perception that the questions often appeared 'contrived' and the process 'choreographed'. This issue is raised again in connection with the influence of the HEQC on the panel members later in this section.

The data collected in this study suggest that institutional staff came to the interview sessions having prepared themselves to respond to questions related to their fields and areas of expertise, and that, when this did not happen as expected, they left confused or frustrated, or both. The CUT case study report records the frustration expressed by a staff member who said that he had not been asked about his specific field of work-based learning but had been asked 'other strange' and somewhat irrelevant questions. This interviewee maintained that his area of expertise is of considerable significance as it is a distinguishing characteristic of academic programmes at universities of technology. He also thought the lack of attention given to this topic in interviews was a possible reason for it not being alluded to in the Audit Report, a further cause of annoyance.

Similar comments about the panel's ability to understand their institutional context were raised in interviews with staff at CityVarsity. Two factors were reported to have played a role here; the first was the very different languages spoken by the panellists and the institutional staff, and the second was the staff's feeling that they were being compared to public providers. The first factor, the anticipated 'language barrier', hampered the initial interview sessions. Staff reported that they had then opted to work hard to help the panel understand their context, actively volunteering information to support their viewpoints, and supporting each other in justifying current systems and explaining the dangers of standardisation in a creative environment.

The second factor, the perceived comparison to public providers, led many of the HoDs and some senior staff at this institution to claim that the panel had viewed the institution through the lens of a more traditional university, which meant that it was assessed on the same terms as a large public institution, especially in areas such as staff qualifications, library resources, student profiles, entrance requirements and administrative systems. In discussing the issue of student profiles, two interviewees argued that private providers are not easily able to change student demographics without offering bursaries. An HoD reported that, initially, it 'felt like the tide was going the other way, it was an uphill battle'; however, a shift in the way the panel viewed the institution became apparent as time progressed.

Some staff interviewed at Mancosa also noted that there were times when this institution was compared to the larger public institutions but that, on the whole, the good mix of panellists provided for a balanced perspective.

While a good match between the audit panel and the institution was reported at SU, one or two weaknesses in the lines of inquiry were noted. For example, it was suggested the panel did not pose questions about important cutting-edge issues such as innovation and intellectual property. It was thought that this was because the panel members themselves lacked experience in these areas. In addition, where a senior manager was asked a question unrelated to his portfolio, he thought that either 'the questions were designed to put him off guard' or the panel did not understand the institution. Finally, it was reported that there were some unexpected lines of inquiry – the example offered was the link between finance and strategy – which were extremely tough to deal with.

The data suggest that questions posed by panel members need to be both pertinent and, wherever possible, specific. A staff member at Mancosa noted that some questions were very general in nature, which suggested that some panellists had either not prepared very well or did not understand the institutional context.

In Section B dealing with the pre-audit phase, the difficulties experienced in understanding the purpose of audit were raised. Similarly, it seems that some interviewees may not have fully understood the purpose of the interview sessions in triangulating data. For example, at CityVarsity, questions were asked about the panel's disciplinary knowledge and it was suggested that if panel members had had greater subject specific knowledge they might have been able to probe more deeply and develop different lines of inquiry. It was thought that this might have made it easier for staff to engage with panellists and their questions.

The effect of attempting to triangulate data in interview sessions was noted by certain senior staff at SU, where these attempts were sometimes experienced as stilted, unstructured and even *agterdogtig* (distrustful, suspicious). They understood that the panel was trying to ascertain whether the SER reflected the perspectives of the entire SU community but nevertheless felt that triangulation had made interviewees feel uncomfortable, as if this was an interrogation in which the panel was 'trying to catch them out'. Similar concerns were raised in the UCT internal evaluation report, where some responses suggest that interviewees had not expected the strong emphasis on triangulation and that this may have contributed to the sense that they were being inspected.

The triangulation of data presented additional difficulties in small private institutions where, very often, staff members have multiple roles and responsibilities and therefore participated in a number of interview sessions.

The role of the HEQC staff in interview sessions

Not all the interviewees in this study had been able to distinguish HEQC staff from the other panel members in their interviews. However, it was reported by those who could do so, that the HEQC staff were very efficient in their coordination of the entire site visit and the interview sessions. At CityVarsity, it was said that the HEQC played an observer role and was sometimes almost protective, intervening where auditors asked irrelevant or unimportant questions. On the other hand, interviewees at both CUT and Mancosa reported that it was HEQC staff who had probed more deeply.

The perceived influence of the HEQC staff on the panel at Rhodes has already been raised. The data suggest that it was more likely to be those staff members who were interviewed in the first two days who held this perception. There were a number of comments that indicated that some of these interviewees thought the HEQC had provided too much direction even prior to the interview sessions in shaping the issues raised as well as the actual questions posed. One interviewee thought that it was HEQC staff who had probed more deeply about transformation. Finally, the way the HEQC used and interpreted datasets and statistics was thought to be unfair both because the institution had not been aware that these would be used in these sessions and because it seemed to them that the HEQC was making comparisons across different institutions, an activity not understood to fall within the ambit of audit.

The oral feedback and the close

Interviewees included in this study were generally very pleased with this aspect of the audit process and agreed that the oral feedback had provided an accurate and often surprisingly comprehensive assessment of their institution's strengths and weaknesses, that there had been no unpleasant surprises and that claims made had been well substantiated. It was reported that issues highlighted as concerns and weaknesses in their institutions had been expected. In some cases, the number of commendations given by the panel had come as a pleasant surprise. There was also agreement that the feedback had been professionally and thoughtfully presented and that the hard work that had gone into preparing for the audit had been acknowledged.

Some staff members interviewed at SU raised two issues that could be improved – the tone and the seating arrangements, both of which were experienced as too 'ceremonial' and a bit like 'a judge giving his verdict'. It was thought that the same positive outcomes of the oral feedback session could have been achieved through a less formal presentation. In addition, a misconception related to comments made in an interview session (these comments were about the relationship between researchers and management at this institution) was noted in the oral feedback session, but there had been no opportunity to clarify this error.

It was also reported that three senior staff members at SU had written extensive notes during the oral feedback session and that these became the basis of the first draft of the Quality Improvement Plan (QIP).

An interviewee at Rhodes reported that it was quite difficult to follow 'written discourse that is being read aloud . . . you really need to focus to understand'. A more serious comment about the oral feedback is taken up later – that the content of the oral feedback differed from that provided in the final Audit Report.

Little data about the oral feedback was included in the internal evaluation report at UCT, except that one respondent thought that the written report should be handed over to the institution because 'important nuances are otherwise lost'.

For some staff interviewed – notably those in the private providers – the oral feedback session provided a sense of closure and they reported that they had been pleased they had not had to wait anxiously for the Audit Report itself. A different perspective, however, was offered at SU, Rhodes and CUT where it was reported that the formality of the interview sessions was not matched with a formal closure to the site visit as a whole. It was suggested that an event such as a tea for all participants would have signalled closure of this event in a better way. These comments indicate that while the professionalism of the audit panel was recognised and appreciated, what was missed was a more 'human face' to the panel and some its activities.

At some institutions, debriefing sessions were held during or soon after the audit visit. Staff at SU reported that those held at this institution had been too formal to capture staff members' emotions and that the debriefing questionnaire had not asked them whether they had learned anything new. The results of 556 completed questionnaires that were received and analysed were published in a statistical report but nothing further seems to have been learned from these.

While no formal debriefing sessions were held at Rhodes, it was reported that staff debriefed informally: the Vice-Chancellor had invited staff to speak to him about their experiences and those interviewed also spoke to colleagues. One interviewee in this study suggested that she might have gained additional insights from the site visit had there been a formal debriefing session for participants where they had an opportunity to discuss experiences and reflect on issues raised. This may be an important point to include in future guidelines to institutions.

Questionnaires were also administered at Rhodes and UCT, the latter providing the data on which the internal evaluation report was based.

B.7 *THE EFFECTIVENESS AND EFFICIENCY OF THE SITE VISIT PHASE OF THE AUDIT*

Effectiveness

Here again, the effectiveness of the audit visit may best be gauged by the shifts that occurred in the way people understood various aspects of audit and its purpose, quality and quality arrangements, and higher education and its institutions generally. While there were fewer such shifts in this second stage of audit, those that did occur were significant, and once again it is important to note that the case study reports record that it was mostly senior managers and deans who came to understand these matters differently. In addition, effectiveness may also be judged by how much the institution learned during this phase and whether it confirmed the value of improvements made in the first phase of audit and the identification of areas where improvements were still needed.

As will be seen, the extent to which staff reported having learnt something during this phase of the audit process varied considerably. It may be that learning was largely dependent on staff members' positions on these issues prior to audit. If this is so, it supports the view that institutions are not homogeneous entities but comprised of a multiplicity of individuals at all layers.

Understanding of audit and quality assurance

One of the most important ways the audit visit at CUT changed people's perceptions was that it made them see audit not just as an inspection at a given point in time but as a reminder of the need to view quality as continual improvement over time. While not as clearly stated, elements of this shift in perceptions were also evident in the comments made by staff at other institutions.

At SU, Rhodes and Mancosa, interviewees reported that they began to understand the value of evidence in making claims and in portraying themselves to others during this phase. This suggests that this understanding may be having an impact on the way records are kept at these institutions, which will help ensure that in future audits evidence will be both accessible to institutional staff. Such an improvement could demonstrate some success to the HEQC and its panel.

Besides developing a better understanding of the importance of evidence, some interviewees at Rhodes reported that they had learned much more about the HEQC and its mandate. Some individuals at this institution spelled out what they had learned about quality assurance arrangements. For example, a dean at Rhodes pointed to new ways of assuring the standard of postgraduate examinations and research. Some interviewees highlighted changes in record-keeping that would help staff demonstrate their successes more effectively. Others reported that they had become more sensitised to terminology since the audit, understood the need to develop strategies to attract and keep black academic staff, and had also begun to see Rhodes within a national context rather than as an isolated and unique institution. Other staff at this institution, however, said the report had not taught them anything, and one was of the opinion that the results had not justified the time expended and the effort made by institutional staff.

When asked whether the work of audit had been worth it, one interviewee at Rhodes said ‘not yet’ but thought that the audit had come at an important moment with the change in leadership. Some staff hoped that the HEQC Audit Report would form ‘a blueprint’ for the institution under its new Vice-Chancellor.

The UCT internal evaluation report states that ‘The audit stimulated debate about aspects of UCT’s QMS that need improvement. Whilst acknowledging that the internal processes prior to the actual audit visit were experienced as the most useful part of the exercise, many participants felt that meshing internal processes with external peer reviews lends more credibility to internal reflective processes and helps to add weight to the importance of actually addressing acknowledged weaknesses.’

A senior manager at SU also reported that during the audit visit he began to see that the HEQC approach cannot be described as ‘a light touch’. He said that he had come to recognise that its work – even in this first round of audit – ‘has huge potential to stop a weak institution in its tracks’.

Interestingly, it was at the level of the senior academics at SU that there was some scepticism as to whether the HEQC approach to audit had introduced new ideas about quality arrangements. They argued that quality issues were already integral to their work and that the HEQC approach could, in fact, encourage a stronger compliance culture instead of a developmental response. One interviewee stated that academics already have to contend with a good deal of monitoring that interferes with their core work. There was also a sense that interviewees had learned that achieving accreditation status requires that institutions be more responsive to the national context and its goals – and that this fosters compliance rather than development.

Development of institutional learning

Despite the criticisms of the emphasis given to the question-and-answer approach followed during interviews and the mixing of staff from different departments and faculties in interview sessions, a number of interviewees reported that they had learned about practices within their institutions from other participants. There were also instances when institutional staff were able to engage more fully with panellists as colleagues and to learn important lessons from their constructive feedback. For example, an interviewee recalled that during interviews she had heard staff members say, 'I had not thought of it that way before'. It is clear that additional opportunities for such engagement would be welcomed.

The data presented in this section of the report suggest there is a great need to open up spaces for conversations within institutions – amongst the academic staff themselves – and also that it is these conversations that may do much to encourage both institutional learning and the development of a quality culture. For example, the case study report for CityVarsity records, 'The most significant learning in this stage was that interdepartmental collaboration could be increased and possible linkages became apparent to staff. In the interviews, HoDs learned what other departments in the institution were doing on a deeper level and how they had developed solutions to common problems. The interviews thus served as a space for staff to share lessons learned as well as best practice'.

The development of a stronger sense of community during the first two phases of audit is also captured in some institutional case study reports. One records that 'All respondents were of the opinion that the audit visit served to bring staff together as a team and create a sense of camaraderie; as one HoD commented, there was a feeling of "having gone through the fire together"'.

Confirmation of institutional improvements already identified

Interviewees reported that one of the important gains made during the audit visit was that gaps identified and improvement initiatives introduced during the pre-audit phase (or, in the case of Rhodes, during the earlier internal academic review process) were often confirmed as having been necessary and appropriate.

Identification of areas needing additional attention

Interviewees at some institutions reported that they had left the interview sessions with a clearer sense of areas in the institution that required additional attention. For example, a senior manager at Mancosa said the panel had pointed out that community engagement had not been given sufficient attention and that there had been misconceptions about research in private providers. At SU, it was reported that the lines of inquiry followed during the site visit had helped staff think more strategically about linking the financial and strategic goals of the university. In addition, staff had become more aware of how institutional culture affects quality, how diversity may contribute to quality and how criticism of the institution need not be equated with disloyalty.

Efficiency

The resources required for this phase of the audit process – especially the person-hours devoted to preparing for the site visit – have been noted by all the institutions. It is clear that the preparations often took longer and required more energy than anticipated. The data also suggest that, for some interviewees, the short interview sessions did not always meet their expectations and may not have been worth the time invested in preparing for them. In addition, it was reported by some interviewees that the intensity of these sessions left them feeling exhausted. The question the HEQC therefore needs to ask itself as it plans future audits is how it can encourage institutions to streamline their preparations without discouraging the engagement with other staff members and the panel members that has been reported as beneficial?

In considering this question, the HEQC needs to bear in mind the points made in this report about the 'wave of monitoring' that threatens to overwhelm academics and to consider how requests for alignment between various monitoring bodies might be addressed.

The UCT internal evaluation report records that an amount of R1 363 529 was spent on the first two phases of audit but estimates that the direct staff costs were approximately R800 000 and the opportunity costs approximately R500 000. This report goes on to note that in assessing whether the expenditure provided value for money, it is necessary to recognise that although the costs were high and a substantial proportion had been incurred as a direct result of the audit, many of the actual activities had immediate benefits for the institution. In addition, if UCT was to be able to develop concrete strategies to address the 26 areas listed for improvement then the spin-offs would be enormous. The report concludes with the statement that, 'overall, therefore, we feel that the audit provided value for money'. In the conclusion to the report, however, there is a more cautionary note – a final judgment on the value of audit would have to be reserved until after an improvement plan had been formulated and implemented.

PHASE THREE: THE PRE-REPORT PERIOD

In analysing data collected from interviewees at the institutions included in this study, comparisons can be drawn between those institutions that made relatively few changes or introduced relatively few new initiatives during the pre-report period (notably, the larger institutions), and those that immediately implemented what they had learned in the first two phases of the audit (notably, the smaller private institutions). In considering the reasons for the differences in responses, issues of effectiveness and efficiency are raised.

B.8 INSTITUTIONS WHERE DEVELOPMENTS AND IMPROVEMENTS WERE INTRODUCED

Staff interviewed for this study at both Mancosa and CityVarsity reported that the issues highlighted in the first two phases of audit were attended to immediately and that this work continued in the pre-report period. These activities included updating and strengthening certain policies (e.g. for certification at CityVarsity and RPL policy at Mancosa), and the creation of new structures (e.g. at Mancosa additional committees were created so as to more effectively delegate responsibilities and at CityVarsity two new key positions – Academic Head and Quality Assurance Coordinator – were created and filled by staff who had been central to the audit).

In addition, at CityVarsity, in the period immediately following the audit visit, planning for the establishment of the academic and examinations boards began. The importance of strengthening administrative systems and centralising student records had also been highlighted in the first two phases of the audit and these were addressed during this phase. Attention was also given to the standardisation of marks and the security of diploma certificates. Finally, new institutional processes – regular staff meetings and monthly academic meetings – were introduced during this period.

At both these institutions, staff reported that weaknesses in the processes of reviewing programmes and in assessment procedures had been addressed. In particular, staff at Mancosa noted that they had taken heed of the audit panel's recommendation to include additional local content in their programmes. Staff at both these institutions referred to the HEQC's recommendations for their libraries and reported that attention was given to upgrading these facilities.

The increased awareness fostered by the audit of the need for staff members at Mancosa to be involved in research was reported to have encouraged senior staff to give more attention to developing a research culture at this institution. For example, discussions on incentives for staff engaged in research took place during this time.

B.9 INSTITUTIONS WHERE RELATIVELY FEW DEVELOPMENTS AND IMPROVEMENTS WERE INTRODUCED

Whereas interviewees in the small private providers listed specific changes and new initiatives at their institutions, responses from interviewees in the larger public institutions tended to be couched in generalities and fewer specifics were mentioned. One interpretation of this difference is that introducing new initiatives in larger institutions takes longer than the time between the audit visit and the institution's receiving the Audit Report. If this is so, it has implications for how we understand change in these institutions and, in turn, for what we expect of audit and impact studies. Another interpretation of the data is that because more changes were needed in the newer private providers they had greater scope for introducing improvements.

Most interviewees at SU agreed that not much in the way of change and improvements had happened during this phase. Some senior managers said the audit process had led them to prioritise certain issues and, in some areas, rework their projects during this time, suggesting that awareness of quality assurance had had an effect on planning, if not on implementation.

Interviewees at this institution also reported that the extensive notes taken by some senior staff during the oral feedback session, together with the list of issues identified for improvement during the earlier 'mock audit', would form the basis for the QIP. It was thought that receiving the Report would put the development of this plan high on the institutional agenda. A senior manager anticipated that a special session of the Annual Planning Forum would be convened in July 2006 to consider the Report. Most interviewees acknowledged that it would be important to increase staff participation during this next phase to ensure they took ownership of the QIP.

At Rhodes, where an incremental approach to introducing changes and improvements was reported to have been adopted, progress was said to have been made in a number of areas that had been identified as requiring attention in the earlier internal review processes and during the development of the SER. In addition, different responses were given by various interviewees regarding the pace of change: for some, this was happening quickly; for others not quickly enough. As already indicated, very few areas of specific change were mentioned – the introduction of the Dean's Forum being one – but reprioritisation of improvements was mentioned.

In summary, while no areas were specifically scheduled for attention in the phase following the site visit at this institution, it was reported that continual progress was being made on a number of issues. It was also reported that progress reports had been submitted to every senate meeting since the audit site visit. Of interest were those comments where staff interviewed said that since the audit they had felt the need 'to take a break' from quality issues and that, given the imminent changes in certain key leadership positions, no further changes could be introduced at this point. Such comments suggest that quality assurance continues to be viewed as an additional task over and above the core business of the institution and that staff think that changes in this area need to be implemented from the top.

At CUT, it was reported that, at the broader institutional level, little was achieved during this phase. People felt a sense of relief that the audit was over, but they were also still holding their breath waiting for the Report. The case study report for this institution records that 'quality was made a cornerstone of strategic planning' and that additional references were made to the importance of quality assurance during this phase, but that there was little in the way of concrete changes. A senior manager at the satellite campus reported that senior staff had tabled a plan for improvements that included ways to address the failure rate and improve learning manuals for students. Certain individual staff members interviewed for this study also reported that they had taken cognisance of what they had learned during the previous phases and had begun to set up new initiatives.

B.10 THE EFFECTIVENESS AND EFFICIENCY OF THE PRE-REPORT PHASE OF THE AUDIT

Effectiveness

The differences in the ways the larger public institutions and the smaller private providers introduced changes and improvements during this phase have been highlighted. In elaborating on the possible reasons for the differences in institutional responses, it is possible to identify some of the factors that may contribute to effectiveness during this period.

Firstly, the data collected in this study suggest that the activities completed in the first two phases of audit created considerable momentum for change at the two small private institutions and, secondly, that the positive oral feedback at the end of the audit visit, in particular, had been important in creating enthusiasm for initiating improvements. As one staff member at CityVarsity reported, 'Everyone was on such a high so it was great to use that momentum'.

In addition, interviewees' explanations suggest that staff at both these institutions had been given very clear indications as to which issues required attention. The clarity and direction provided during the audit visit appear to have been important in helping institutional staff move forward during this third phase. It is also possible that, as indicated earlier, more changes needed to be made in the relatively new institutions and also that staff at these institutions raised fewer questions about whether these improvements should be introduced.

The introduction of new initiatives at larger public institutions may require different processes and procedures to those required in the smaller private institutions and these may not allow for the same pace of change. Further research would be useful, to investigate these interpretations and possibilities more carefully.

Efficiency

Once again, it is useful to draw attention to contextual issues and the timing of the audit as being important factors in facilitating change and improvement. For example, staff at Mancosa reported that, while requiring additional work and effort from staff, the relocation of the institution shortly after the audit visit provided a good opportunity for staff to initiate changes and improvements. On the new campus the library was allocated more space so that additional student resources could be provided.

While senior staff at Mancosa were also able to build on the platform of their prior experience of quality assurance arrangements introduced as a result of the relationship with BCUC, staff at CUT had only just begun to grapple with a new approach to quality assurance, and this at a time when issues related to its change in status to a university may have taken priority. In addition, this institution still lacked the leadership, structures and culture to effect change and improvements in this phase.

At SU, the absence of the QAM during a large part of this phase was thought to be one reason why little progress had been made during this period. Similarly, changes in key leadership positions after the site visit to Rhodes were reported to have been partly responsible for the relative lack of change at this institution. These examples suggest both that new initiatives need to be better facilitated and supported in stable institutions and that changes in quality assurance arrangements are still seen as emanating from institutional leaders.

PHASE FOUR: THE RECEPTION OF THE REPORT

This section begins with a description of how the various institutions in this study circulated and disseminated the HEQC Audit Reports and their contents before considering responses, both positive and negative, to these reports.

Note that CUT, Mancosa and CityVarsity had received their Reports over a year prior to this study, while Rhodes had received the first draft of theirs approximately a month prior to the interviews conducted for this study. SU was still waiting for its Reports at the time that the fieldwork took place. In some ways, it seemed that Rhodes was still coming to grips with aspects of their Report, and this may have been one reason why there were more negative comments from staff at this institution than at the others.

As will be seen, the reported strengths and weaknesses of the Report and the effectiveness of this phase of audit may be of particular importance in understanding the responses of institutions in the development of the QIP and in Improvement Period 1.

B. 11 CIRCULATION AND DISSEMINATION OF THE AUDIT REPORT

The way the Audit Report is circulated and its contents disseminated within the institution may be important in both the short term (to inform staff about the content of the report) and the longer term (to introduce changes and improvements). At present, there are no guidelines from the HEQC as to how institutions should deal with the circulation of the Report or how they should work with the recommendations made in this document.

While confusing accounts were given as to how the Report was circulated and disseminated at CUT, it is clear that this document was not widely circulated – even among senior staff, and that this gave rise not merely to general unhappiness but also to speculation about its contents and even some intrigue as staff considered possible reasons for the secrecy surrounding it.

Interviewees at this institution reported that while some members of senior management became familiar with the report in its entirety, in most cases other staff members had read only those sections that pertained directly to them and their areas of responsibility. This meant that when staff did respond to recommendations, it was done from a narrow perspective and that the recommendations made were not necessarily pertinent to other staff across the institution.

Dissemination of the Report was also limited at both Mancosa and CityVarsity. Senior managers at Mancosa reported that it was posted on the intranet, but lecturers said they were informed of areas requiring improvement at a meeting. At CityVarsity, it was reported that the Report was circulated to all HoDs and relevant administrative staff; however, two of the HoDs interviewed for this study said they had not read the report.

One of the reasons given for the limited engagement of staff with the Report at both Mancosa and CityVarsity was the time that had elapsed between the audit visit and the receipt of the Report. A senior staff member at City Varsity pointed to the delay between the audit visit and the receipt of the report and said that report would have 'fallen flat' if it had not been for the oral feedback given at the end of the audit visit. Ensuring speedier delivery of the Report may be necessary if the momentum of the audit visit is to be maintained in institutions.

At Rhodes, it was reported that the first draft of the Report had been circulated to the APC, the deans and the Quality Assurance Committee, but beyond these people it remained confidential – possibly because it was only the first draft. A number of interviewees suggested, however, that there were 'lots of rogue copies about' and that many more staff members had had access to these. It was also reported that the Vice-Chancellor had presented the main findings of the Report to the Senate and the Faculties.

Eighteen written responses – varying from those who thought the Report was a balanced report to those who wanted it completely redrafted – had been received and were being integrated into a single response at the time of the interviews for this study. A number of interviewees indicated that they hoped that the final Report would be different in a number of respects.
Interviewees at both CUT and Rhodes said that many staff members who had read the Report tended to read it rather as though it were a scorecard rather than engaging critically or reflectively with issues. In other words, they counted the numbers of commendations and recommendations and then compared themselves to other institutions on this basis.

Some interviewees reported that they would have welcomed an oral presentation of the Report by HEQC staff and the opportunity to discuss how to address the issues mentioned in the recommendations.

B. 12 RESPONSES TO THE AUDIT REPORT

Interviewees in this study identified a number of strengths and weaknesses in the Audit Reports for their institutions.

Strengths identified

Well-structured, accessible

Overall, interviewees reported that the Report was well-structured and well written, accessible and easy to translate into the QIP. A senior manager at SU commented that it was 'like a strategic plan for us . . . we literally got a set of consultants in to come and look at the whole institution'.

Fair, balanced

Again, overall, interviewees reported that the content of the Report was fair, relevant and well-balanced and held few surprises in that the institutional weaknesses identified had been highlighted during the first two phases of audit and in the oral feedback at the end of the site visit.

Although not noted as a strength of the Reports as such, it seems that for certain institutions (certainly both Rhodes and Mancosa), these documents, and in particular their recommendations, have helped staff members to better understand the need to be able to provide tangible evidence for their assumed successes. As suggested earlier in this report, staff members acknowledged that they might not have been sufficiently well prepared to provide good evidence in this first round of audit, but thought they now understood better what needed to be done in future.

An interviewee at Rhodes – one who had offered a balanced critical account of the audit process followed at this institution – was pleased with the Report and surprised at how insightful it was – 'it's cut to the Rhodes culture'. This interviewee also thought there were a number of staff at this institution – especially those hoping for change – who felt similarly.

Weaknesses identified

Lack of criticism

Interestingly, some staff members at CUT thought the Report generous and possibly even a little lenient in that it was very general in nature and did not take issue with significant systemic gaps in quality assurance arrangements in the institution. Some of these staff members also thought that the audit panel had accepted documentation and interview responses at face value rather than subjecting them to sufficient triangulation and critical analysis.

Surprises, incorrect criticism

For most interviewees, there were few surprises in the Reports. At Rhodes, however, a number of interviewees said that the draft Report had been different from the oral feedback. For some, there were 'substantial' differences. A few interviewees suggested that the Report was so off-target that the HEQC *might as well* have written it before visiting and had not been changed so as to incorporate the information provided to the panel during the interview sessions. As already indicated, responses to the Report from interviewees at this institution differed considerably and it was claimed that the report had affected professional and personal relationships. Again, the lack of institutional voice is highlighted here.

Certain staff interviewed for this study pointed to criticisms in the Report that, in their opinions, had no foundation. The most serious of these came from some interviewees at Rhodes who said that the panel did not seem to have understood their interpretation of and approach to quality assurance. In addition, one staff member said that although monitoring and support may be weak at this institution, they are not ignored as the draft Report suggests. It may be that underlying this criticism is a different view of how to best to bring about change in higher education institutions. Comments from staff interviewed suggested that they felt that each institution has a right to decide how to introduce change and should not be given too much direction in this regard. (The debate about direction versus guidance in the Report is taken up again a little later in this section.)

Another surprise noted by a staff member at Rhodes was the 'big push' toward centralisation, managerialism and greater bureaucracy. The question was posed: 'How will increased managerialism improve the research output and 85% throughput rate at this institution?' Another question was: 'Where is the evidence from the HEQC that the current system is not working?' For some staff, an increase in managerialism is synonymous with a reduction in trust in academics and higher education institutions.

Interviewees at CUT and Mancosa were unhappy that certain recommendations in the Report did not reflect the gaps and weaknesses that had already been identified by the institution itself either in the SER or in the panel interview sessions. A similar comment was made by an interviewee at Rhodes who felt 'betrayed' for having encouraged staff members to be open and self-critical in the preparation phase, as the Report had merely reiterated staff disclosures in its own recommendations. In other words, exposing weaknesses during the earlier phases of audit had come back as a kind of criticism and punishment in this phase.

Finally, some staff were not pleased that their comments and feedback on the draft of the Report had not been included in the final report.

Unfair criticisms

A staff member at Rhodes felt that the Report had commented negatively on certain information provided, for example the use of the term 'non-white' in the Statistical Digest. It was pointed out that the use of this term had not been questioned during the audit visit when errors in the digest might have been explained. In addition, the way that statistics had been used in the Report was seen to be unfair: a staff member commented that it seemed that outdated statistics had been used to support 'preconceived judgments', especially in relation to transformation efforts at this institution.

It is clear that interviewees expect the HEQC to provide evidence to support the criticisms levelled in the Reports.

In addition, some important observations were made about the HEQC not taking into account what is required in order to effect changes to the status quo in institutions. This suggests that even for those staff who want to initiate improvements there are various factors – one of the most important being financial – that hinder their efforts. In other words, the HEQC needs to consider what is 'do-able' in the current higher education environment.

Contradictions

At Rhodes, some interviewees thought there was a contradiction between the commendations received about current successes at this institution and the recommendations for greater centralisation and managerialism.

Tone

Once again, it was some staff members at Rhodes who felt that the tone of the Report was not even-handed. One staff member described it as 'high-handed, arrogant and directive'. Comments from interviewees here and at the other institutions suggested that the tone of the Report should not be judgemental or prescriptive. Further comments about judgement and prescription are made below.

Omissions

Omissions in the Report – usually in the form of anticipated commendations – were also noted by some interviewees e.g. the importance of experiential learning at CUT and the good IT system at Rhodes.

Irrelevancies

A few interviewees thought the Report had gone beyond what they thought was the 'audit mandate' in some cases; however, it may be that where institutional staff members' understanding of certain issues was limited they were not able to make connections between issues raised in the Report and quality and quality arrangements. For example, the plethora of policies at CUT was not viewed as a quality issue by some staff members and they commented that the HEQC should confine itself to its brief when making recommendations. Such comments suggest that the report writer may need to include reasons and explanations for criticisms of certain features of an institution.

Length

A few interviewees criticised the Report for being too lengthy.

Timelines and deadlines

As indicated earlier in this section of the report, the period of six months between the audit visit and the arrival of the Report was viewed as a lengthy one and it seems that many staff members had almost forgotten about the audit during this time.

In addition interviewees noted a practical problem in planning for quality improvements: by the time the Report arrived at the institution, the following year's budget had already been finalised, which meant that any new initiatives (especially those that required capital) could only be addressed in the budget for the year after the next.

B.13 VIEWS ON 'JUDGEMENT' AND 'PRESCRIPTION' VERSUS 'GUIDANCE'

Earlier sections of this report have highlighted the somewhat different responses from interviewees to the role of the HEQC. These responses may be seen to relate to the way the audit panel and its members respond to the institution and its staff not only during the site visit and in the panel interview sessions, but also in the Audit Report. Both the tone used in the report and the content of certain recommendations were commented on.

Interviewees at CityVarsity and Rhodes said that while the HEQC promotes a developmental approach and speaks of institutions having unique contexts, its practice in terms of the recommendations and commendations provided in the Report does not always use this approach. For example, at CityVarsity a senior staff member said she did not want to hear that staff needed degrees in their areas of expertise when there were no such qualifications in South Africa and when they were already providing quality programmes. As already mentioned, staff at Rhodes commented on the lack of consideration given to this institution's interpretation of and approach to quality assurance and called the HEQC 'the watchdog of the Department of Education'. These comments highlight certain staff members' impression that the HEQC is prescribing particular interpretations of and approaches to quality and quality assurance.

It needs to be noted that a number of interviewees at the private providers were not against the Report following a more judgmental approach – possibly because a favourable judgment from the HEQC was perceived to provide these institutions with greater status as higher education institutions.

While not necessarily in favour of a stronger judgmental approach, some staff members at CUT believed that the HEQC should clarify suggestions for improvement based on best practice examples. For example, one staff member suggested that they be given targets against which they could benchmark themselves.

The diverse comments about the extent of guidance welcomed by institutional staff suggests that the HEQC needs to move away from the use of generic Audit Reports to a careful consideration of the institution being audited, its history and its own developmental needs.

B.14 THE EFFECTIVENESS AND EFFICIENCY OF THE RECEPTION OF THE AUDIT REPORT PHASE

One of the greatest values of the Audit Report is that it has improved institutional staff's understanding of the use of evidence in audit – especially the need to demonstrate proof of quality and of success. This has often happened because, although the evidence initially provided in the SER and the interview sessions seemed sufficient to institutional staff, the recommendations made in the Report suggest that more substantial evidence of claims made is required.

The limited circulation of the Reports in the institutions and the fact that they were not much read by the majority of institutional staff may lessen their effectiveness in bringing about institutional learning and change. To increase the effectiveness of this phase of the audit, the HEQC might usefully consider producing a set of guidelines on how the Report might best be circulated. An oral presentation session would also provide an opportunity for the HEQC to explain connections between the content of the report and quality issues. The presentation sessions could also be extended to include further opportunities to workshop solutions for weaknesses identified. Should oral presentations be included, it might be possible to reduce the length of the Report.

Comments about criticisms made in the Report suggest that it is important that lines of inquiry in interview sessions address all the quality gaps or weaknesses noted by the HEQC and other panel members in their reading of the SER and other documentation. In addition, institutional staff should be given the opportunity to explain these in interview sessions before criticisms are levelled in the Report. The data suggest that surprises and unexpected criticisms in the Report increase staff members' resistance to the audit process. In addition, recommendations need to be carefully worded: where quality gaps or weaknesses have been acknowledged in the SER or by institutional staff, this needs to be reflected in the recommendations.

Finally, the HEQC needs to be aware of institutional timelines for planning cycles: most institutions have November deadlines so the Report needs to be sent well before this time if it is to have an impact on institutional change the following year.

PHASE FIVE: THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE QUALITY IMPROVEMENT PLAN

Quality Improvement Plans (QIPs) had been submitted to the HEQC by three of the institutions included in this study – CUT, Mancosa and CityVarsity, and a QIP had been drafted by the QAM at SU. Interviewees at Rhodes were still dealing with the draft Audit Report at the time of the interviews for this study and, as indicated, it was also reported that no changes would take place until the new Vice-Chancellor took up his position. UCT's internal evaluation report does not provide any detail on the plans for developing a QIP, but the paper written by the Director of Institutional Planning acknowledges the challenges this will present.

This section outlines the approach followed in developing the QIP, its perceived value, and effectiveness and efficiency issues.

B.15 THE PROCESS FOLLOWED IN DEVELOPING THE PLAN

At all the institutions that had submitted a QIP to the HEQC, the development of this document followed much the same pattern as that followed in developing the SER in the pre-audit phase – this despite assertions that staff in these institutions had recognised that the process followed in developing the SER had not maximised the opportunities it could have presented for critical reflection, institutional learning and development. For example, at CityVarsity one senior manager was assigned the responsibility for developing the QIP using input provided by the HoDs. However, whereas HoDs were required to provide portfolios of evidence for the SER, their involvement in the development of the QIP was even more informal and ad hoc. One HoD at this institution said that he was not aware of the deadlines for improvement and was uncertain as to who was currently handling issues related to the plan. Certainly, it seems that the initial excitement generated at this institution during the first four phases of the audit was not sustained and carried over into this phase. A senior manager explained that it had been difficult to get everyone's buy-in for this process as six months down the line there was a feeling of 'you have made the changes and are moving in the right direction, so you have other things to you need to focus on'.

Similarly at Mancosa the QIP, like the SER, was written by a management committee. Here an attempt was made to integrate it with the institution's strategic plan. It was reported that the QIP essentially summarised each of the recommendations from the Audit Report, assigned a priority to them, then outlined action plans and criteria and listed staff members responsible for action. Staff members at both CityVarsity and Mancosa were pleased that their Reports had translated so easily into the QIPs.

At CUT, the responsibility for developing the QIP was assigned to one person in the QA Office, who asked certain staff members to respond to recommendations in the Report. Their contributions were collated and sent to Senate, MANCOM and Council for final approval before being sent to the HEQC. Again, this exercise did not maximise the opportunities presented for working across the institution but followed the narrower approach used to develop the SER. This approach appears to have influenced some of the more critical and negative perceptions of the value of the plan, as described in the following sub-section, B16.

After the audit visit, the QAM at SU was tasked with drafting the QIP. In doing so, he made use of the notes taken in the oral feedback session at the end of the audit visit and the list of areas identified as requiring attention during the 'mock audit'. After this staff member fell ill at the beginning of 2006, no further progress was made on the QIP. It was anticipated, however, that it would again become a priority in July 2006.

The lack of guidelines on how to develop the QIP was noted in a number of interviews, although staff at Mancosa reported that staff from the HEQC had visited them in order to outline their expectations.

The paper based on the internal evaluation at UCT and made available to the research team highlights ‘a fundamental contradiction’ in the process followed in the audit at this institution. It reads

> At UCT the bulk of the load of preparing for the audit was carried out by administrative staff and this helped to mobilise the support of the academic sector. This gives rise to a fundamental contradiction because the source of success of the self-evaluation part of the audit process could potentially be the cause of difficulties, or even failure, in the improvement planning part of the process. Whilst administrative staff can lead the process of preparing the audit portfolio, they cannot lead the process of developing an effective improvement plan. Unless academics have a hand in shaping improvement plans they are unlikely to be taken seriously and used to guide changes in behaviour. Thus the real extent of academic staff participation and ownership of the outcomes of the audit process at UCT can only be tested in the process of developing and implementing the improvement plan. In contrast to the preparations for the audit, improvement plans need to be developed and organised around conversations with academics to stimulate thinking about innovations and improvement. Academics need to become directly involved in setting goals informed by ideas of what would constitute ‘enhancement’, and in developing a system for identifying and disseminating good practice.

B. 16 THE PERCEIVED VALUE OF THE PLAN

Interviewees at CUT held different views as to the value of the QIP. The more critical perspective argued that it was not sufficiently understood as an institutional plan, that there had been very little dialogue about it, and that where dialogue had occurred it had been ‘very superficial’. The final submission was also described by one interviewee as ‘too vague’ and ‘not implementable’. More specifically, it was reported that the links between the institution’s strategic plan and quality improvement, and the potential of the annual report as a quality improvement tool, had not been understood. It was also reported that issues of staff development and capacity building, for both academic and support staff, had not really been captured in the QIP and that there were no institutional structures to effect change in this area. It seems then that, as with the SER, the development of the QIP provided for very little in the way of institutional reflection. Those who held this more critical view – the minority of staff interviewed – also reported that since the submission of the plan there had been very little real debate about how to take the recommendations forward: essentially, it was felt that nothing more had happened.

Further gaps and absences in the QIP were also noted by other staff members interviewed. For example, the CUT case study report records: ‘One of the important HEQC recommendations – the inclusion of the Equity Unit within human resources – had not yet been dealt with, despite this being a permanent item on the MANCOM agenda.’

A more positive perspective was offered by those who felt that the QIP was quite a useful working document. While acknowledging that it applied to the institution as a whole and that very little could be applied at faculty level, some interviewees reported that both the Audit Report and the QIP had stimulated debate and provided a strategic focus for management, and others said that the process of staff engagement with these documents had had an impact on faculty level improvement plans.

The case study report for CUT records that 'despite assertions that communication had improved between the Bloemfontein and Welkom campuses, quality improvement at the Welkom campus seemed to be progressing in isolation from and uninformed by the institutional QIP of the Bloemfontein campus. None of the Welkom campus staff had been asked to make any submissions for the plan, and most seemed unaware of the existence of the document'.

Senior staff members at Mancosa said they believed that the Audit Report recommendations included in the QIP were realistic and achievable and that the institution was well placed to meet the goals it had set itself. Change and improvement are viewed as a process rather than an event. A progress report on recent developments was reported to have been submitted to the HEQC.

B. 17 EFFECTIVENESS AND EFFICIENCY ISSUES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE PLAN

As indicated here, lessons learned in developing the SER about what processes to follow – especially the importance of including additional staff in reflecting on institutional systems and practices – do not seem to have been applied to developing the QIP. Once again, the work of developing this document was allocated to particular individuals, usually the QAM, or groups of senior staff. Here it seem that efficiency was favoured over effectiveness and that institutions might be operating in compliance rather than developmental mode. The danger of this approach to gaining the acceptance of institutional staff as they move into Improvement Period 1 has been highlighted.

In addition, the data included in this section suggest that some of the institutions that had already developed a QIP had not integrated the use of other important institutional documents and processes in developing it. Such data suggest that further guidelines for this phase are necessary.

Finally, no interviewees made any comments about the HEQC feedback on the QIPs already submitted. It is assumed that such feedback would be valuable in strengthening the QIPs.

PHASE SIX: IMPROVEMENT PERIOD 1

CUT, Mancosa and CityVarsity were all in this sixth phase of the audit process at the time this study was conducted and staff interviewed at these three institutions reported on changes and improvements as well as areas where little in the way of change had been effected.

This section of the report categorises the types of changes reported at both institutional and faculty levels. It outlines the difficulties involved in implementing the QIP and argues that more careful monitoring of improvement initiatives is needed, and concludes by summarising effectiveness and efficiency issues.

B. 18 INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL IMPROVEMENTS

Cultural change

As already suggested in the earlier sections of this report, among the key developments in institutions undergoing audit will be changes in the way staff members view the institution, its systems and processes and in the ways they relate to each other. For example, interviewees reported that their understanding of how the work of committees is interlinked has developed – not only during this phase of audit but also as a result of their engagement in the earlier phases. In addition, as a result of this experience some individuals had also begun to see themselves as part of a larger institutional community. These changes are subtle and do not mean that ways of working are vastly different from what they were before audit – rather, there is an increased awareness of how staff in different faculties and departments can learn from each other and how work in one area of the institution may affect work in another area. It is important to note that increased awareness does not necessarily translate into changed or improved practices. For example, while it was reported that the academic voice at CityVarsity came to the fore in the earlier phases of audit, it was also reported that maintaining the balance between this voice and the business voice requires constant attention.

The case study report on CUT suggests that staff at this institution are beginning to understand that a highly regulated culture does not necessarily assure quality, and that it may, in fact, limit people's initiative and sense of responsibility by discouraging innovation and creativity. Thus, staff now understand that it is not the *number* of policies in place that is important but rather their *quality* and how effectively they are implemented. In addition, it was reported that there was a significant change from viewing audit as 'policing' or 'inspection' to viewing it as 'continuous improvement' and with this change has come a shift from compliance to greater engagement.

Structures, roles and responsibilities

More tangible changes have also taken place in a number of areas within the institutions included in this phase of the study. An important change at CUT is the location of the Unit for Quality Management. As outlined earlier in this report, before and during the audit this office fell under the Registrar, a largely administrative function. The QAM now reports to the DVC (Academic), a move generally welcomed as it is thought that the expert leadership and institutional authority of the DVC will give the unit both strategic direction and institutional leadership and power. Some concerns about this change were also raised, however, by those staff who believe that quality will simply be seen to be the responsibility of academic staff and not of the institution as a whole. These staff favour a more systemic approach to quality improvement and have argued that Quality Assurance, Institutional Planning and Information should form a functional unit on its own, reporting directly to the Vice-Chancellor.

An interesting perspective was provided by an interviewee at CUT who said that quality assurance is still not well understood as a role for each individual. He commented that as soon as higher education identifies a role 'they structure it', and in so doing so separate the role from the work of individual staff members.

Although there were positive reports of improvement at CUT, it was also clear that certain areas of the QIP are not receiving much attention at all, and that others – by their very nature – will take longer. For example, it was reported that the satellite campus continued to work on improvements in relative isolation, and that the equity targets set by the institution had not yet been met. That there is still much work to be done at both the cultural and structural levels at this institution is clear. One interviewee was quite pessimistic about the rate of change and said that the traditional hierarchical structures, as well as many of the key senior managers, were still in place. He was of the opinion that change would not happen until a whole new generation of staff members with different perspectives were appointed.

Senior staff at Mancosa reported that, with the exception of one community engagement project, it is anticipated that there will be 'tangible evidence' of implementation of all aspects of the QIP. The final section of the case study report for this institution provides a table listing key areas identified for improvement, work on which began in the earlier phases of the audit process. To summarise, the Academic Board along with additional committees (including a Student Committee) were established, and this, together with the appointment of additional staff and HoDs, means that directors now play a more strategic and supervisory role. Academic policies have been reviewed and greater engagement with the business and wider communities has been encouraged. The resource centre has been strengthened, as have other forms of student support. In addition, the importance of staff undertaking research has been accepted and incentives to encourage this have been discussed. The Department of Research is now better resourced and produces an annual journal.

Similarly, the case study report for CityVarsity provides a table of key changes. The Academic Board was reported to be fully functional and new posts, including Academic Head and Quality Assurance Director, were established. In addition, in late 2005, departments were restructured to form three faculties. Centralised record-keeping systems have been introduced and are being maintained – although not without some difficulties. In this institution, too, the resource centre has been upgraded and increased student access provided through the establishment of a bursary system. Finally, staff development has been addressed through work with the Centre for Higher Education Development at UCT.

B.19 FACULTY LEVEL IMPROVEMENTS

At CUT, where there were varying perspectives on the value of the QIP, a number of interviewees reported that specific recommendations made in the Audit Report were indeed being taken up at faculty level and that they featured in the improvement plans developed at this level. For example, it was asserted that staff members are beginning to think differently about **curriculum development** is a result of the HEQC recommendations, and that they realise that courses must be relevant to the community and environmentally sensitive and that assessment must be relevant to the learning outcomes targeted. In the faculties, too, it was reported that it is generally understood that quality improvement is a continuous process.

Two of the most significant reported spin-offs of staff members being required to work on improvement plans at faculty level are increased awareness of the importance of quality assurance arrangements and increased transparency (both within and beyond the institution) as a result of staff members opening up their thinking and practice and providing more regular reports on progress made. For example, a director reported on new processes staff members in this unit are using to develop learner guides for students that will be peer reviewed by colleagues from other institutions. It is hoped that by making peer reviews common practice, a culture of transparency and critique will be cultivated. In addition, it was mentioned that by including all staff within the unit in these processes staff capacity would be broadened.

Although staff at the satellite campus at CUT had not been much involved in the main QIP, senior management interviewed here reported that they had been asked to request programme heads to consider quality in their teaching and in their student manuals, and to increase lecturers' awareness of quality issues. It was reported that the audit criteria had been widely disseminated amongst the academic staff at the Welkom campus after the audit visit in order to encourage this awareness.

The priority given to quality assurance arrangements was reported to have had some negative spin-offs at CUT: some other projects no longer receive the same amount of attention as before and staff now focus on fewer strategic issues in order **to attend to these 'properly' so as to complete whatever needed doing.**

The ongoing review of programmes and study guides was also mentioned by interviewees at both CityVarsity and Mancosa. Again, the issue of local content was raised as having been addressed during this phase.

The increased interdepartmental collaboration reported to have occurred at both these institutions during the earlier phases of the audit process was reported to have opened up opportunities to share best practices. This has had significant benefits for both staff and students.

B.20 IMPLEMENTATION AND MONITORING

The implementation of certain recommendations from the Audit Report during Improvement Period 1 has not always been straightforward, which suggests that there are often practical issues that need to be addressed before implementation can take place. At CUT it was reported that collaboration with other higher education institutions had presented certain conflicts. For example, the intention of the regional consortium to centralise administrative functions related to RPL was perceived to be in conflict with the recommendations of the HEQC. Some interviewees at CUT suggested that discussions with the HEQC on this and other issues would be helpful.

As already mentioned, a practical problem in introducing change initiatives is that related to timelines and deadlines. At CUT, by the time the Report arrived at the institution, the following year's budget had already been finalised (the budget for 2005). This meant that any new initiatives (especially those that required capital) could only be addressed in 2006.

Two factors were reported to have made the implementation of certain improvement initiatives difficult at CityVarsity. The first was staff turnover, especially when it was staff who had been through the audit process who left – and left with the knowledge they had gained in the earlier phases of audit. This suggests that while learning has taken place, it is largely individual rather than institutional learning. The second factor was the financial capabilities of the institution to provide for improvements. Two HoDs commented that implementing the QIP has again highlighted tensions between the academic and business imperatives in the institution. Balancing quality issues and financial constraints is an ongoing problem.

What does not seem to be very clear in any of the three institutions operating in Improvement Period 1 is what counts as monitoring of changes and improvement. At CUT, monitoring appears to be equated with regular reporting, and even this is conducted as an 'add-on' exercise. For example, a dean who was interviewed said he felt he was falling short in attending to quality improvement and monitoring on a continuous basis as he tended to look at progress only when it was time to present the next quarterly report. In addition, there is no institutional plan for how monitoring should be conducted. This means that at the satellite campus, and possibly in some of the faculties too, work is done largely in isolation.

At CityVarsity, the senior manager responsible for monitoring reported that two years after audit there is still some resistance to the new record keeping systems that have been introduced and that it is necessary to constantly remind staff to submit the necessary documentation. This interviewee commented that resistance to change is to be expected and that such resistance is heightened when working with creative people. It was explained that the new systems require staff to fulfil an administrative task when they do not see themselves as administrators, and thus these issues fall to the bottom of their list of priorities. This interviewee also acknowledged that the need to comply with HEQC requirements provides some leverage and admitted, 'It sounds terrible to say this but you sometimes use the HEQC and CHE as sort of a threat to get things done'.

B. 21 THE EFFECTIVENESS AND EFFICIENCY OF IMPROVEMENT PERIOD 1

While some changes and improvements are reported to have been made at some of the institutions during this period, it was difficult to determine the extent of staff participation in initiatives. The data suggest that there is still resistance to change and that the value of certain new quality assurance arrangements is not yet recognised. The lack of monitoring in place in institutions may be as a result of such resistance. However, without good monitoring systems, it is difficult to assess the extent of the changes and their impact. It is clear that additional guidance on practical issues associated with implementing new systems and practices, including monitoring, is required, especially as more and more institutions are moving into Improvement Period 1.

SECTION C : AUDITORS' EXPERIENCES

This section of the report focuses on the experiences of auditing as described by a selection of auditors drawn from panels at each of the institutions included in this study. Besides highlighting the important understandings gained through the audit experience, much of the data collected in these interviews serves to confirm the findings documented in Section B of this report. It is important to note that there are, in addition, key issues pertinent particularly to auditors, chairs and report writers.

The first sub-section presents what auditors learned, with particular reference to the contributions of the auditors' training workshops and the portfolio meetings. The following two sub-sections detail data that confirm key issues documented in Section B and data that elaborate more fully on additional key issues – especially how lines of inquiry are developed during the preparations for audit, the process of triangulation and the use of evidence. While some of these issues were raised by some institutional staff during the site visit interviews, the auditors foregrounded them using stronger voices, so as to better highlight the challenges presented in the HEQC's approach to audit. The final sub-sections deals with issues raised by the report writers interviewed in this study and recommendations suggested for improving the audit process.

C.1 UNDERSTANDING GAINED THROUGH THE EXPERIENCE OF AUDITING

Auditors were extremely positive in reporting on their experiences of audit – particularly about what they personally had learned about audit and its processes as well as about the higher education sector and its institutions. For example, one of interviewees stated that 'Being an auditor was an extremely powerful experience' and that learning about the complexity of higher education institutions and the 'size of the beast' left her with a sense of humility. She also said that she had come to realise how different institutional histories contribute to their perspectives and why it is that institutions and their staff deal with issues differently.

Another auditor said, 'It was an enormously enriching experience, especially to interact with knowledgeable colleagues, the team and the HEQC'. This auditor went on to say that the experience forced him to think about higher education institutions in this country and 'the development problems they are facing'. In addition, he said that learning about the diverse ways institutions tackle issues was very helpful. A number of similar comments were recorded: One auditor said she felt she had been given 'an eagle's eye view' of higher education and, as a result, her daily priorities had changed and she had become more attentive to ensuring that quality measures are built into administrative, teaching and research activities.

The experience of being an auditor helped panellists at institutions still to be audited. For example, one such interviewee said that as a result of being an auditor he had gained the confidence to write sections of the SER for his own institution, which is to be audited in 2007. This interviewee described the experience of audit as 'intensive, exciting and extraordinarily rich'.

It is interesting to note that few auditors interviewed said they had learned more about quality management arrangements or about how to enhance the quality of aspects of their own work such as students' learning. This may have been as a result of the overall focus of the study and of the questions posed in interviews, or perhaps their comments about developing their understanding of quality assurance were subsumed in their comments about audit. A third interpretation is also possible – it may be that the design of this study did not focus sufficiently on this issue?. It is suggested that a future study could track how individual academics who worked as auditors viewed the issue of quality through all the stages of audit so as to better understand how and why these shifted, and how such shifts were taken up in action and practice.

Of those interviewees who did mention quality and quality assurance arrangements, one said that participating in the audit as an auditor had gone some way towards giving her faith in quality assurance in that she saw that accountability could be generative and, therefore, positive rather than 'just managerial'.

This view was not necessarily held by other auditors who addressed the issues of quality and quality assurance more directly. For example, an interviewee who is currently writing his own paper on the HEQC approach to audit said that he felt the audit had pushed higher education institutions further into developing management models which may work for some institutions but not all. He felt that the current approach does not allow for differentiation.

It is also important to note that the developmental approach was not always highlighted in the way in which some auditors spoke of how they understood audit. For example, one interviewee likened audit to 'getting a roadworthy certificate or having a health check-up'. While acknowledging that both these kinds of inspections could lead to improvement, this interviewee did not foreground the developmental thrust of audit in his responses.

Auditor training workshops

Interviewees' responses indicate that the auditor training workshops and to some extent, at least for certain audits, the portfolio meetings had helped them understand differently. Referring to the workshops, one auditor said that it had been the 'practical exercises of going through a mock portfolio, having to identify key issues and formulate questions' that had been most useful, and that 'comparing different ways of asking questions and what is meant by evidence was also very useful'. High praise came from another auditor who described the workshop as 'marvellous, excellent, both in terms of the materials it provided and also because of the interaction it allowed'.

Despite the many favourable comments on the workshops, it is important to note that a chairperson interviewed warned that 'no matter how much auditor training one attends, it cannot really prepare you for the real thing'; rather, he saw the workshops as being useful for 'dispelling myths' about audit, helping participants 'come to grips with what it is about', providing opportunities to practise certain processes, and encouraging 'an attitude of tolerance'. Only one auditor interviewed for this study made negative comments about a workshop. Although in the minority in this regard, this auditor's comments are recorded here as they seem significant. This interviewee called the workshop 'superficial and irritating in the extreme' and explained that the critical point of the training had not been clearly made, i.e. that the HEQC required participants in the workshop to make a 'substantial paradigm shift' in thinking about quality. As an academic, this interviewee said, one dealt with quality quite differently, making *implicit professional judgements*. The HEQC, on the other hand, was seen to be more *managerial* in its approach, using *instruments, mechanisms* and specific *processes*. Later in the interview, this interviewee expressed the opinion that the chair of the audit panel had not yet made the transition from an academic to an HEQC perspective and as a result had difficulty holding the vision of the audit together.

This interviewee thought that the role play exercises had been useful, but would have preferred these to have been included in the portfolio meeting – thus also eliminating the need for two separate preparation sessions.

The portfolio meeting

It may be that portfolio meetings for different audits varied in focus and structure, as comments from interviewees for this study on their usefulness were somewhat mixed. These comments also suggest that activities and levels of engagement varied in these meetings. At the lower levels, the portfolio meeting was described as 'more introductory in nature', providing an opportunity for auditors to meet each other and for 'sorting out practical issues, such as transport etc.'.

The engagement of participants at the higher levels appears to have given rise to some confusion amongst some auditors. For example, one auditor described the development of the lines of inquiry by the HEQC as having been 'a bit of a mystical process' while another, a chair on one of the panels, reported that it was clear that some auditors in his panel had not been happy with the 'prototype report' presented during this session. These issues are further dealt with later in the report.

A third auditor, who had had experience on two different panels, explained that the portfolio meetings were 'limited in use' because 'the HEQC staff were usually better prepared than the panel' and because the auditors 'were not given a very clear brief of the process'. He thought it would have been more helpful if auditors had been asked to conduct more structured preparation prior to the meeting (such as writing preliminary statements), and also if they had been provided with a written summary of the documentation. In other words, he felt that auditors needed to be given more direction both before and during this meeting.

A different perspective was provided by another auditor who explained that prior to this meeting auditors had been given a document from the HEQC as an aid to guiding their reading and for developing lines of inquiry. (Note: this was an auditor on one of the early audits. This was omitted in later audits.) This auditor described this document as being very detailed and a source of confusion when referring to it while also reading the SER and other institutional documentation. In addition, this auditor felt that having the HEQC documentation made one 'lazy' in one's reading of the SER and the institutional documentation, as much of the work had been done already. For this person, these factors detracted from the rigour of the audit process. (Once again, issues relating to documentation and the development of the lines of inquiry are given further attention later.) Despite these criticisms, this auditor also stated that the portfolio meeting itself had been useful for starting to develop a structure for each session and the lines of inquiry, and in allocating questions and tasks to auditors.

It seems, however, that auditors' roles and tasks were not always defined during portfolio meetings. One auditor said that her role had been allocated some time after this session and that the process only really became clear to her at the Sunday meeting just prior to beginning the site interviews.

Appreciation was expressed for the provision of practical examples during the portfolio session. For example, one auditor said that the concrete input on data and evidence had been helpful.

C.2 CONFIRMATION OF DATA FOUND IN SECTION B

As indicated earlier, much of the data provided in the short telephone interviews with auditors confirm the findings already presented in Section B of this report. For this reason, short summaries of these issues are presented here.

Selection of auditors and their understanding of institutional context

A chairperson interviewed emphasised that it is vital that auditors are selected on the basis of their broad understandings of higher education institutions as well as their specific understandings of the institution being audited. He had noted that at the CUT audit some of the auditors from traditional universities had not understood the purpose and unique features of a university of technology. As a result, inappropriate follow-up questions had been asked and he thought that some interviewees may have felt 'badgered'.

One of the auditors interviewed appeared to have been criticised by institutional staff for not having the same status (and, therefore, possibly, the same experience and knowledge) as some of the others on the same panel. (In Section B.6 it was reported that an interviewee commented that an auditor had 'punched above his weight'.) This interviewee said that it needs to be understood that the HEQC selects auditors on their 'life and academic experience, their contributions to higher education and their particular expertise; it is not about their academic ranking or superiority' and suggested that the HEQC 'consider alerting institutions about who is being chosen for the audit panel and why, to defuse people's sometimes negative attitudes'.

Preparation of auditors

It seems that many of the auditors interviewed had taken their homework seriously and attempted to read the documentation provided; however, the excessive amount of documentation meant that some of their reading had been cursory, with the result that in some cases they were not sufficiently prepared to ask appropriate questions.

Excessive documentation

The issue of excessive documentation was reported to be an issue for both the institutional staff and the members of the audit team. A chairperson interviewed for the study said that the documentation had been ‘a killer’ and warned that unless the system is simplified, the whole audit process could ‘drown in a sea of paper’. He said, ‘It is too rigorous, demanding of people’s energy and time consuming.’

Recommendations for the HEQC have been made by institutions regarding documentation. The primary recommendation is to provide clear guidelines as to what documentation is needed so that collecting and reading it becomes more manageable for both institutional staff and auditors.

The role of the chair

The importance of the chair’s role was emphasised in both the institutional staff’s and the auditors’ interviews. Being at the interface between the panel (which includes HEQC staff) and the institution being audited, the chair needs to have good interpersonal skills as well as good critical abilities in identifying issues for engagement. In almost all the interviews conducted for this study, the chairs were reported to have been highly competent. (Only one was reported to have been poor in the role.) They were viewed as having built a sense of cohesion in the audit team, handled sensitivities well, managed the time and the time pressures, and carefully monitored and controlled the direction of questions from auditors, pulling auditors back where they might have overstepped the mark. The importance of listening well and remaining calm in the face of anger was highlighted by one of the auditors interviewed.

A chairperson interviewed in this study said that a chair needs to have ‘a broad and deep knowledge of the higher education sector and many years of senior management experience in institutions. A lot of what is needed is common sense, gut feelings that come from experience, and a strong instinct for the right decision to make. A chairperson must have strong leadership abilities and be able to direct discussion firmly but carefully. They must be diplomatic, tactful, but decisive’. This interviewee also said that if the HEQC selected the right people to be chair, it would not be necessary to provide additional training or preparation for this role. Later in the interview, he also suggested that the chair should be part of the panel selection committee in order to ensure that auditors were selected from similar institutions and with similar values to those held by the audited institution.

There were some questions from a few interviewees about whether the role of integrating the data should be that of the chair or the report writer or perhaps both. It seems that this was not always made clear during some audits.

The most critical comments about the performance of chairs came from a minority of interviewees who highlighted the need for chairs to be able to 'pick up on key issues to drive deeper discussions'. One of the interviewees warned that this was a critical skill that might be overlooked if the HEQC chose chairs 'for their political correctness or their status' rather than their knowledge of higher education and quality assurance.

Superficial rather than engaging discussions

The lack of 'deeper discussions' was another element of the interviews raised by a number of auditors echoing the criticism of institutional staff who felt that the interviews generally operated at a superficial level. One interviewee recalled that an international auditor had been particularly good at facilitating and enabling 'collegial. She said, 'For instance, he would ask whether this or that would work in their particular higher education context, testing and getting conversations going around different approaches'. Not only did she think his questions incisive and engaging, but that he also 'had a way of lifting people's moods' that was appreciated.

Another interviewee noted that the panel members had not had enough time between sessions to reflect on the data and evidence presented in previous sessions. She said that there were times when auditors were 'winging it' but that this had usually been noted by the HEQC.

The number of interview sessions and the numbers of interviewees in these sessions and the requirement of posing questions to each of the participants were additional factors mentioned as inhibiting deeper discussion.

The number of interview sessions and the size of interview groups

One of the interviewees summarised the problems here by saying that 'there were too many interviews, especially as every interviewee was asked a question'. This meant that that 'there was not enough engagement with and discussion of critical issues which could have yielded valuable learnings'. This interviewee suggested that some interview sessions could be combined while others could be omitted completely. Generally, she thought that there should have been fewer, longer sessions.

Another interviewee said that the first two days of general institutional interviews were fine; however, the subsequent interview sessions with the specialist sub-groups seemed like 'overkill', especially for the size of the institution being audited. She also pointed out that the panel had made sure that each interviewee was asked a question, but that with between eight and 12 interviewees in the sessions this was excessive, especially as the 'drilling down' to core issues happened very quickly.

It seems that, currently, the panel interview sessions address quantity rather than quality, which may impede the possibility of achieving a developmental approach to audit.

The tone and style of the interview sessions

As happened in the interviews with institutional staff, a number of the auditors made links between the lack of deep discussion and the tone and style of the interview sessions. One thought that the unhappiness experienced by institutional staff in the first two days at Rhodes had been ‘fuelled by the formality of the occasion’ while another interviewee, a chair of one of the audit panels, said that, sometimes, a less ‘rigid’ approach could have elicited information more easily. This interviewee went on to say that, while the audit is evidence-led, it is also important to identify what has been omitted from SERs and at times this is not possible in the current approach used in interview sessions. Finally, he said that it was sometimes very tedious for the panel to adhere to the same structure session after session.

In many cases it seems the formality of the interview sessions eased after the first day or so and that auditors and institutional staff interacted as peers. An interviewee said that he had learned that ‘every institution has the same sort of problems’ and that after a while the initial ‘us versus them’ dynamic eased.

The time span of the site visit

Some interviewees commented on the length of the site visits – especially those that progressed from Sunday through to Friday and ran from 06h00 or 07h00 until 22h00 or so each day. One described this as ‘a highly laborious and intellectually intensive process’ and another said that ‘even if the visit had extended over two weeks or longer, the auditors would still have been under pressure’ without necessarily getting a better picture of the institution.

A number of suggestions were made as to how the time span of the visit might be changed. One interviewee thought that an initial audit of three to four days should be held, after which areas for improvement could be identified and later dealt with in workshops involving smaller panels. Alternatively, he thought that the audit could be structured to include more panels, each of which would deal with specific focus areas. He thought that these alternatives would also make auditors more willing to participate in additional audits.

It was also pointed out that the current approach necessitated auditors taking quite some time away from their own institutional roles and responsibilities. This, too, was not considered sustainable in the long run. One interviewee suggested that institutional staff be seconded for a year or two to work on institutional audits. Alternatively, he thought that more use might be made of recently retired professors as auditors.

The oral feedback and closure

As can be seen in Section B of this report, the oral feedback was greatly appreciated by institutional staff. The oral feedback also seems to have been valuable to members of the audit panel. One interviewee reported that preparing for the oral feedback provided the opportunity for him ‘to concentrate the mind’. He also said that there was mostly a high degree of consensus among the auditors on the two panels on which he has served, and that where there were disagreements auditors discussed and resolved their differences. He referred to the helpful structure provided by the HEQC that enabled this to happen.

The abrupt closure to the site visit and immediate leave-taking of auditors was an issue raised by both institutional staff and auditors. One interviewee described the closure as ‘clinical and cold’, while another said ‘the protocol was awkward as there was not proper collegial leave-taking’. Two auditors jokingly remarked that the abrupt ending created the impression that the panel was running for cover! Another said that the abrupt departure of the audit panel had left the institution ‘completely dumbfounded’ and that, if this was indeed going to be the approach taken, the institution should be warned in advance. She also thought that institutional staff should have the opportunity to raise ‘one or two questions for clarification’. Many interviewees recommended that the oral feedback and closure should provide time for ‘collegial sharing and relaxing’.

Sustainability of the current approach

The scope and intensity of the HEQC approach to audit was considered unsustainable by a number of auditors interviewed for this study. One said, ‘At a logistical level, the amount of energy and effort that the HEQC, the panel and the institutions put into the audit is not sustainable’. In addition, some auditors raised the issue of the current capacity of the HEQC which meant that if the panel was overworked then ‘the HEQC staff was ten times more so’.

C.3 FURTHER ISSUES RELATED TO THE AUDITING EXPERIENCE

The lines of inquiry

The development of the lines of inquiry

As already indicated earlier, the process followed in developing the lines of inquiry was not always clear to some of the interviewees. One said that she felt that the auditors on the panel on which she had sat had been quite strongly ‘steered in certain pre-decided directions’ by the HEQC and that this was especially evident in the pre-portfolio meeting document sent by the HEQC to the auditors. Here, it seemed that certain lines of inquiry had already been identified and were being prescribed. This interviewee went on to say that, initially, she had been a little puzzled by this ‘strong hand’ but, in retrospect, she thought that the HEQC had taken this approach because she and most of the other auditors were ‘first-timers’ and that the lines of inquiry were not very clear in the SER being dealt with.

A report writer interviewed for this study provided additional information about the process of identifying the lines of inquiry. He explained that the HEQC had 'drawn up a pro forma pre-audit analysis scheme' which enabled him to draw up a 'prototype report', which he described as 'a sort of skeleton of a draft report' based on a reading of the SER and all the associated documentation. In addition to drafting this report, he suggested lines of inquiry, and these were given to the auditors with the intention of 'focusing their minds' at the portfolio meeting. The report writer went on to say that certain auditors had not liked this approach and that one had been 'insulting' about the prototype report calling it 'a comprehensive set of crib notes'. After this, the document was not used in the meeting, which was then largely unfocused, resulting in some auditors being ill prepared for the audit.

The issue of the pro forma or draft report was taken up differently by another interviewee where it seems that no such report had been used in the portfolio meeting. He recalled that 'the panel was working from generalised impressions from the documents and it would have been sharper if the HEQC had helped them draw up provisional statements – like a draft report – to work from'. Yet another interviewee suggested that the auditors themselves should give more time to reading the SER and developing lines of inquiry.

The data suggest that the portfolio meeting and its purpose need to be clarified and in particular it needs to be clear whose responsibility it is to develop the lines the inquiry to be used in the interview sessions and that a clearer explanation needs to be given as to how this should be done.

The relevance of the lines of inquiry for specific institutions

As has been indicated in Section B of this report as well as earlier in this section, where auditors do not understand the context of an institution they may ask irrelevant or inappropriate questions. It also seems that not all SERs have captured their own institutional context very well, so it may be that the HEQC needs to provide the audit team with additional information about the institution's history and recent developments so that they will be in a better position to develop relevant lines of inquiry.

According to a chair interviewed for this study, it is essential that the person taking on this role spend some time with the HEQC staff independently prior to the site visit in order to be brought up to date with 'special background information' about the institution and also any recent developments that could influence the way staff might respond to questions in the interview sessions.

Triangulation of data

One of the key purposes of the interview sessions is to triangulate the data in the SER and the associated institutional documentation. It is clear from responses, however, that attempts at triangulation took place of various levels and that it was the more superficial or technical level that were most often used in the interview sessions. As one interviewee said, the sessions focused on 'simply triangulating and did not do enough digging into issues'.

Another interviewee pointed to the difference between triangulation of what interviewees said in the sessions (and this was reported to have happened), and triangulation of the *documentation and evidence* made available. The latter was reported not to have happened, largely because of time constraints. The evaluation thus privileged what was said in the interviews over the evidence provided.

The use of evidence

As indicated in Section B of the report, institutional staff found the term evidence problematic in a number of ways, especially regarding what might be considered as valid evidence for the audit. There were fewer comments about evidence from the auditors than from institutional staff in this study, and the comment above about what was said in interviews being privileged over evidence seems to suggest that auditors may have felt somewhat confused themselves. They may have wondered what counts as evidence and to which evidence they should be paying most attention.

One interviewee appeared to indicate that the problem was more than just confusion – rather, there was a flaw in the methodology of the HEQC's current approach to audit, which stresses documentation, evidence and triangulation. For this interviewee, this approach was 'pushing higher education institutions further into management models', which may not be appropriate in all institutions. His comments are noteworthy not only because he said the approach needs to be more flexible in taking into account different institutional contexts, but also because his comments may be interpreted as pointing to a contradiction between the intentions of the HEQC in its approach to audit and the results of this approach. Tensions of this nature may require further discussion in the auditors' training workshops and the portfolio meetings.

The post-audit process

For some interviewees the post-audit process had been very confusing and the roles of the auditors during this period had not been clarified. For example, one interviewee said that she had sent to the HEQC the 'bits and pieces of notes' she had collected during audit but that 'it was not clear what happened to them from there'. She said that the panel did not meet again after the oral feedback and that she had no idea what had happened with the writing of the Audit Report. In some ways, this meant that there was no real closure of the process for the auditors themselves.

Another auditor said that the post-audit period was badly handled because auditors were not kept in the loop and did not get to see the final report. Although she had made comments on the draft report, her input here was never acknowledged and she does not know whether it had been useful or not.

Aspects of the post-audit process are further highlighted in the following section.

C.4 FURTHER ISSUES RELATED TO REPORT WRITING

The issue of a prototype report being developed prior to the interview sessions (and even prior to the portfolio meeting) has already been raised and the varied views on this described. To recap: it seems that where a draft report was developed independently of the audit team, this served to focus auditors' minds and to help allocate their responsibilities during the portfolio meeting. However, the role of the HEQC in this aspect of the process and its 'strong hand' in the development of lines of inquiry has been an issue for some auditors. Clarification of these processes is needed.

Further issues related to report writing were raised by the report writers interviewed for this study. One of the most important of these was the critical role of the panel review sessions in helping the report writer to fulfil his or her role. It was explained that where a chair manages time well, reviews are more likely to happen as scheduled together with reflection and assessments. These reviews provide the report writer with useful points to be included in the report. Where such discussions do not happen (for example, if the time for the interview sessions squeezes out the time allocated to panel review sessions), the report writer then has to rely much more on his or her own judgement.

A second issue identified was that where panels were divided into smaller specialist groups, there were not always dedicated note takers, which meant that the report writer had to rely on the oral feedback of auditors rather than written notes. This was considered to be unsatisfactory as the report writer was not able to fully understand discussions and their contexts. It was suggested that two to three dedicated report writers be allocated in each audit to overcome this problem and to ensure that 'all the expertise is not locked up in one person'.

These comments suggest that the work of the report writer needs to be carefully supported by that of the auditors. As a report writer said, the way the audit is conducted is key to the report-writing process. If auditors are poorly prepared or if they do not make good notes or link the evidence of their observations (of what was said) to the documentary evidence, then it necessitates a lot more work by the report writer. It was suggested that if the auditors do not pull together, then ultimately the Audit Report is compromised.

A third issue raised relates to the later part of the process after the HEQC has submitted the third draft of the report to institutions for comment. It was reported that the final report (the one which takes into account comments from the institutions) had been changed but that the report writer had not been part of this process. An opinion was expressed that it is important for the report writer 'developmentally' to stay part of the process until the end and it was suggested, diverging from the current procedure, that the report writer should receive the institutional comments from the audit officer and then either amend the report or reject the comments, furnishing reasons for doing so. The HEQC could then interface with the institutions if there were any further disagreements.

Finally, it was suggested that report writers need to be ‘free of other professional commitments’ so that they ‘can concentrate on report writing in an intense and focused way’. It was thought that it would be preferable if report writers were ‘based in the HEQC’ so that they are able to ‘interact with the HEQC staff on a daily basis during the period of the audit and the report writing – for opinions, assistance in making judgements etc’.

The key recommendations made in this section of the report are also taken up again in the following final section.

SECTION D: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In synthesising the key findings presented in Sections B and C, this section of the report begins by providing recommendations for strengthening the HEQC's approach to future audits. These recommendations do not provide for a new model of audit but rather for additions to and modifications of the current model and processes in order to help institutions learn more about quality and quality assurance arrangements. The report concludes with suggestions for possible initiatives to be tracked in future research studies.

D.1 KEY AREAS OF THE AUDIT EXPERIENCE TO BE STRENGTHENED

In outlining key aspects of the audit experience which could be strengthened, this section of the report also highlights challenges for the HEQC as it moves towards completing the first round of audits and preparing institutions to deal with the second round.

Increasing institutional understanding of audit, its purposes and processes

Section B of this report indicates that while the HEQC has attempted to ensure that institutions and their staff understand audit as a developmental process rather than a judgmental exercise and one that serves to encourage self-reflection and improvement rather than mere compliance with policy and regulations, and while significant shifts in how staff members understand audit are reported to have occurred during the audit process, a lack of clarity about audit, its purposes and processes and the terminology used still prevailed in the initial stages of audit in certain layers of the institutions included in this study.

In those institutions where there was a richer and deeper understanding of audit – notably the traditional universities – this was not necessarily widely enjoyed or well communicated and so this understanding did not permeate all the layers of the institution. In most cases, such understanding was restricted to senior staff who were more familiar with the concept of audit through their knowledge of the international higher education context. It was also noted that the shifts in how audit was understood were limited to those staff who had participated in the audit exercise, particularly the development of the SER.

The struggles reported by interviewees in developing the SER have also been highlighted in Section B of the report: understanding the criteria and the potential value of the open-ended questions, identifying appropriate evidence for inclusion, making decisions about the amount of supporting documentation to be collected, and deciding on the structure of the final SER for submission to the HEQC. The lack of clarity on all these issues had consequences for the ways institutions approached the work of developing the SER in the first phase of audit. It has also been suggested that the approach adopted in developing the SER has, in turn, had consequences for the later development of the Quality Improvement Plan and the implementation of change initiatives in Improvement Period 1.

In addressing how institutions understand audit, particular attention needs to be given to its overall purpose, and to the purpose of specific processes such as the development of the SER and interview sessions during the site visit. The issue of the 'hidden agenda' of transformation and the relationship between transformation and quality needs to be foregrounded. It is also necessary to link the purpose of audit to the broader national higher education policy context. The data collected for this study suggest that while these issues are deeply engrained in the HEQC's own understanding and approach, this is not yet the case for many institutional staff. In addition, while the HEQC may assume that institutional staff will start to understand this during the audit process, the data collected in this study suggest that this process might be fraught with conflict and that the development of better understanding may be limited to only a few.

The need to strengthen institutional understanding of audit through the provision of pre-audit workshops and best practice models as well as through more detailed guidelines for the development of the SER and additional opportunities for to-be-audited institutions to work with recently audited institutions were also highlighted in the interviews conducted for this study.

Comments some interviewees made about the purpose of audit highlighted the limited scope of the HEQC audit and especially the implications of this for introducing improvement initiatives. In particular, the financial capacity of the institution, the relationship between management and staff, and the wider local political dynamics were all reported to have affected the extent to which improvement initiatives could be introduced. In addition, further opportunities for engagement in teaching and learning issues – rather than management and systems issues – were identified as being important for inclusion in the scope of future audits. These comments also suggest that it is important for audit to be based on a good understanding of how change happens in higher education institutions and the factors that facilitate institutional change.

Widening participation in the pre-audit phase

The data collected in this study suggest that one of the key ways of developing a good understanding of audit, its purposes and processes is through participation and engagement – especially in the development of the SER in the pre-audit phase – so that individuals are given opportunities to experience the challenges associated with preparing for audit and to develop solutions both individually and alongside their colleagues. Interviewees in this study reported that such participation helped them to better understanding not only audit and its processes but also quality and quality arrangements and the higher education sector generally.

While it is certainly understandable that, in this first round of audit, it has been senior managers who have been the driving forces, one of the key challenges for the HEQC as it reviews and refines its approach to audit is to develop ways to encourage wider institutional participation. Wider participation in the audit exercise is likely to provide additional opportunities for staff to engage in both debates and discussions and, very significantly, in the introduction of improvements to enhance quality.

Overcoming staff resistance to audit (and other external review processes) will be central to ensuring that there is wider participation in the key activities of audit. While the cascading model of participation used by several institutions included in this study and described in Section B of this report provided for wider participation, it did not necessarily provide for deep engagement. Responding to a draft of the SER, while important, appears to be less beneficial than grappling with the criteria, writing responses to the open-ended questions and drafting sections of the SER. Given that the coordination of wider participation would prove an even bigger task than described in Section B of the report, the widening of participation may need to go hand in hand with another challenge for the HEQC – that of streamlining the preparation process.

Streamlining the preparation process

While having greater clarity about audit, its purposes and processes would certainly be helpful to institutions entering the first round of audit, and while widening the participation of institutional staff in the preparation for audit would be helpful in developing institutional understanding of audit, higher education and quality assurance, streamlining the preparation process would be even more helpful in reducing the time and energy spent during this phase. In particular, it would be important to reduce the amount of documentation institutions are required to identify and collate, especially in the second round of audits. As indicated in Section B, the focus on and attention given to collecting and developing documentation, in some cases, reduced the reflective and educative potential of audit and limited it to a ‘supply and comply’ exercise.

In finding ways to meet this challenge, the HEQC needs to consider requests made for best practice models and further guidance in key tasks such as identifying and analysing evidence and writing the SER. While issues relating to efficiency underlie these requests, it needs to be remembered that the data suggest it was often in struggling with issues and through debates and discussions that staff members acquired new insight and understanding. This then suggests that there may need to be a trade-off between efficiency and effectiveness when changes are made to the audit processes. In other words, in providing additional guidance on how to deal with the processes of audit and so streamlining the preparations, opportunities for debate and discussion amongst staff members and for them to ‘apply their minds’ may be reduced, and even lost. What is important is that the support and guidance provided by the HEQC during the pre-audit phase should ensure greater clarity for institutional staff. This, in turn, should address aspects of resistance to audit while at the same time developing greater confidence amongst institutional staff in their ability to meet the HEQC’s requirements.

Increasing institutional learning in the pre-audit phase

The three sub-sections above point to ways in which institutional learning about audit and its processes, quality and quality assurance and higher education and its institutions may be enhanced. The recommendations listed below may either be taken up directly by the HEQC or included as guidelines for institutions.

- Extend the provision of HEQC audit preparation workshops to include staff in to-be-audited institutions – focusing on the developmental aspect of audit.
- Spell out the role of the HEQC staff in shaping the issues raised and the questions posed (including the lines of inquiry).
- Structure additional opportunities through which to-be-audited institutions can learn from the experiences of previously audited institutions.
- Open up spaces for conversations between institutional staff – both within and across departments and faculties.
- Use the open-ended questions as a basis for departmental, faculty-based and institution-wide debates and discussions.
- Provide opportunities for institutional staff to better understand the HEQC criteria by linking them to examples of the institution's own processes and practices (i.e. make the criteria less abstract and more meaningful).
- Provide opportunities for institutional staff to share examples of best practice with colleagues in the same institution.
- Provide opportunities for institutional staff
    - to write small sections of the SER,
    - to develop ideas for improvements and new initiatives, and
    - to develop plans for implementing these initiatives so as to fully appreciate what is required.
- Provide opportunities for institutional staff to rehearse for the audit visit and interview sessions so that the purpose of the interview sessions (particularly the triangulation function) is well understood.

This list suggests that deep engagement in a variety of activities may be required to improve the institutional staff's understanding during the pre-audit phase. In addition, many of these activities may help bridge the gap between individual learning and institutional learning.

Preparing auditors better for their work in interview sessions

This study elicited some important comments and criticisms as to how auditors might be better prepared for their work as auditors. These suggestions span the early preparation in auditors' training workshops and the portfolio meeting through to the site visits and include the following.

- Provide an explanation as to how the HEQC approach to *quality* (rather than to audit) is different to what might traditionally be used in many institutions.
- Provide clear guidelines for how the auditors should approach their reading of the SER and other documentation and provide certain tasks to be completed.
- Ensure auditors understand the history and unique context of the institution to be audited.
- Ask auditors to prepare certain lines of inquiry prior to the portfolio meeting.
- Debate the lines of inquiry offered and compare them with those developed by the HEQC.
- Explain why certain lines of inquiry are to be followed rather than others.

- Develop these lines of inquiry into a prototype report.
- Clarify the levels at which triangulation of data is to operate – for example, between what the various interviewees say in interviews, and between what is said in these and what has been written in the SER.
- Assign responsibilities to specific auditors in advance of the site visit.
- Model 'collegial engagement' and ways to probe claims, present contradictions etc.
- Debate the approaches and perspectives underlying the questions to be used – i.e. are they really advocating a managerial approach?
- Ensure that there is sufficient time for auditors to reflect on and discuss each day's interview sessions (and even each session during the day) and also to carefully strategise before the following day's sessions.
- Ensure that written notes are taken in each of the panel sessions – so as to provide the report writer with a written account of each session.

Increasing auditors' understanding of institutional contexts – extending the panel interview method currently used

The data collected in this study pertaining to the preparation of panel members and the extent to which they understood unique institutional contexts and posed relevant and appropriate questions have suggested that there may be additional aspects and activities to be included in future audits, especially in relation to the site visits and interview sessions. Key recommendations in this regard are listed below:

- Provide an opportunity for institutional staff to kick off the audit process with a brief presentation – unique features of the institution could be highlighted here.
- Share all data to be used as the basis for interview sessions and in the development of questions.
- Incorporate additional smaller interview sessions in the interview programme.
- Provide for longer sessions so that issues can be explored.
- Structure interview sessions around specific issues.
- Incorporate collegial discussion along with triangulation as a focus in interview sessions.
- Visit additional areas within the institution.
- Observe activities in some of these areas.
- Speak informally to both staff and students in these areas.

In effect, this list suggests that audit visits should incorporate additional activities rather than focus on an analysis of the SER and question-and-answer interview sessions, and that a more varied audit programme would provide for better insight into how institutions actually work.

Increasing institutional learning during site visits

Interviewees' descriptions of the impact of the question-and-answer approach used in interviews and the formal tone and style of these sessions provide important clues as to the expectations and hopes of institutional staff during the site visits. In particular, it appears that interviewees had hoped for opportunities for greater engagement with panel members. In addition, the very real appreciation of what had been learnt from both colleagues attending the same sessions and panel members further confirms that the scope and purpose of interview sessions should either be clarified for institutional staff or perhaps reconsidered. If the latter, the purpose and scope of the audit visit may shift: rather being used to triangulate information and interrogate evidence, these sessions – or at least some of them – could be changed so as to provide for a more workshop-like environment where institutional staff and panellists could engage as peers in discussing systems and practices.

The UCT internal evaluation report records:

> We would like to suggest that the HEQC needs to review the structure and orientation of the interviews during the site visit. Whilst the objectives of the audit require the panellists to use the interviews for the purposes of triangulation, it is suggested here that the interview schedule should be structured in such a way that it allows for triangulation as well as more effective engagement about suggested areas for improvement that the institution itself identifies. More dialogue about institutional deliberations on strengths and weaknesses would enhance the value of the audit through stimulating thinking about novel ways on addressing challenges.

The data collected in this study suggest that some institutions would have found the process a better one if they had felt like equal partners, like colleagues, rather than as if they were being interrogated. The role of the chair in setting the tone for these sessions is crucial, as is the openness of the panel to understanding the context of the specific institutions. The size of the panel and the length of individual panel sessions may also be reconsidered as ways of increasing institutional learning in future audits.

Institutional learning may also be enhanced by wider participation in the oral feedback session at the end of the site visit. Interviewees' own recommendations relating to the oral feedback suggest that, while they appreciated the early opportunity for feedback, they would have been happier if they had received a written copy of this and if there had been an opportunity for them to respond – even if this were only to record any errors or inaccuracies noted.

Increasing opportunities for collegial engagement during site visits

Many of the points made highlight the need for future audits to increase the opportunities that it potentially provides for collegial engagement both within institutions and also between interviewees and members of the panel. In addition, the data suggest that many interviewees experienced the interviewee sessions as courts where judgements were passed rather than as an opportunity for peers to work to strengthen and enhance the higher education sector. The following suggestions (some of which have already been referred to in previous sub-sections) have been made for consideration by the HEQC for future audits:

- Provide an opportunity for institutional staff to kick off the audit process with a brief presentation – this will help to level the playing field and help institutional staff gain a sense of ownership of the process.

- Share all data to be used as the basis for interview sessions and in the development of questions – there should not be any surprises for institutional staff in this regard.
- Incorporate additional smaller interview sessions in the interview programme.
- Provide for longer sessions so that issues can be explored in greater depth – possibly for solutions to be dealt with in a workshop.
- Extend invitations to the oral feedback session to all audit participants.
- Provide time for brief comments by institutional staff at this feedback session.
- Conclude the site visit with a social occasion – even a half-hour tea break.

Understanding institutional action (and inaction) during the pre-report phase

In considering the data related to changes made (or not made) in institutions during this phase of the audit process, the complex nature of change in these institutions needs to be acknowledged. The data collected suggest that the HEQC audit, while an important catalyst, is only one factor amongst others that prompts, enables and supports change in these institutions. Interviewees pointed to national policies ('the hard realities in the changing HE landscape') and international trends, and the relationship between these factors and audit in prompting change and development. Certainly, the authority of the HEQC was reported to be an important lever in the institutions – often used by senior management to ensure that staff complied with quality assurance arrangements. In addition, there were suggestions that staff and students might use the audit and its processes to put pressure on management.

An analysis of those institutions in which a number of changes and improvements were reported reveals the importance of providing participants with a positive audit experience and highlighting their successes. This appears to have been important in building momentum for introducing change in both the pre-report phase and the post-audit period. In addition, the data suggest that where institutions are clear about what is expected of them and what it takes to bring about changes, they are in a better position to respond immediately to what they have learned during these phases.

This report has highlighted the differences in the ways the smaller private providers and the larger public institutions responded in terms of introducing change and new initiatives, and also suggested possible reasons for these differences. In the larger public institutions, planning and participation appear to be more cumbersome processes, taking longer than in the smaller private providers. The latter may also have more ground to make up than the former and also staff here may raise fewer questions and arguments about what needs to be done.

Stability within the institution may also be an important factor in the pre-report phase. At Rhodes, for example, little in the way of change and improvement was reported to be initiated while staff were awaiting the new Vice-Chancellor's arrival.

Increasing institutional knowledge and understanding of the Audit Report

The data collected from interviewees suggest that institutions may not yet have given sufficient thought to how the Audit Report could best be circulated within the institution. Some guidelines from the HEQC on this matter might be helpful. In addition, the importance of ensuring that the Audit Report is delivered as soon as possible after the audit in order to sustain momentum for change has been highlighted. It may be that the HEQC needs to develop a better strategy for report writing – possibly by ensuring that there are dedicated report writers for each institution and that these people are given sufficient training and support for this challenging and important work.

In addition, a number of improvements have been suggested regarding the ways the Audit Report is presented to the institution by the HEQC. Recommendations have been made for oral presentations to a wider audience where misconceptions and errors can be clarified and solutions and strategies dealt with in a workshop. There were suggestions that the Audit Report could be shorter and, for some institutions, more specific in outlining the actions that need to be taken. The HEQC will need to continue to consider how to provide a balance between ensuring there is clarity in its suggestions for improvement and proving sufficient flexibility for individual institutional responses in these reports. Certain types of institutions, particularly those that are relatively new and those that have fewer institutional resources in terms of knowledge of and expertise in quality assurance matters, may welcome direction – others will not.

While no suggestions were made as to how to overcome this difficulty, it was thought that listing commendations and recommendations tended to encourage staff members to read the report like a scorecard. Again, further guidelines from the HEQC on how to read the report are required.

Increasing participation in developing the Quality Improvement Plan

Additional guidelines for developing the QIP would be appreciated by institutional staff. Similarly, an opportunity to explore possible change initiatives at a workshop with HEQC staff – a process which could also encourage wider staff participation in the development of these plans – was suggested by interviewees at those institutions where QIPs had been completed. As highlighted in this report, the development of an institutional voice during this phase of the audit process will be essential if change and improvement are to be introduced.

Enabling institutional action during Improvement Period 1

In its assessment of the work completed during this phase of the audit process, the HEQC will need to consider the comments made by a number of staff members about change being a process rather than an event. In addition, the data collected in this study indicate that the need for capital investment, forward planning, and support for staff at all layers of institution need to be taken into consideration. One of the most critical areas where support is required is that of monitoring – unless change initiatives are monitored, it will not be possible to evaluate their effectiveness. Monitoring systems will need to take into account the evolutionary nature of change in higher education institutions and the various phases that institutions go through in introducing and implementing change.

Should the HEQC intend to ascertain the impact of audit on higher education institutions, the monitoring systems in these institutions may need to be designed with this intention in mind. A number of interviewees in this study argued that there are many factors influencing change in these institutions today, with national policies for the sector being probably the biggest factor. These 'hard realities in the changing HEI landscape' are forcing staff to realise that they 'no longer have choices'. The HEQC is one of these 'hard realities', but it appears that it is the combination of forces that are bringing about change rather than just the HEQC audit itself. Finally, monitoring systems may need to capture change at a range of levels – for example, cultural and structural.

Addressing issues of sustainability

The sustainability of the current approach to audit was questioned by a number of interviewees – both institutional staff and auditors alike. One auditor also commented that the resources of the HEQC are likely to be further stretched when audits are conducted at institutions that have even fewer resources than most of the institutions included in this study. He thought it possible that the HEQC would need to provide additional guidance to such institutions – through all of the phases of audit. One recommendation for increasing sustainability was shorter, more focused site visits, and another was the need to limit documentation, as already mentioned.

D.2 POSSIBLE INITIATIVES FOR TRACKING IN FURTHER RESEARCH

At a number of places in this report, the need to initiate a research process such as this one in the earlier phases of audit has been mentioned. Not only would this ensure current or relatively recent data and reduce the risk of interviewees not remembering events and experiences, it would also provide for more focused questions and data. This study, in spanning five phases of audit, has been broad in its scope and purpose. Research conducted in each of the phases of audit would yield closer insight into the activities and challenges associated with each of these phases. One possible focus could be the views of individual academics on quality as they progress through the five stages of audit.

In addition, this report has been limited in terms of the numbers of institutions studied. It would be useful to test some of the interpretations of the data collected in this study. For example, the differences in and interpretations of institutional responses to the introduction of change and improvement initiatives in the pre-report phase need further investigation.

Section B of this report also provides for the identification of a number of possible initiatives that could be tracked in future research projects. A selection of these is provided below:

Structural changes

- Studies could track how the shift towards greater managerialism in institutions is effected and experienced and the consequences of this development. Perhaps it would also be useful to ascertain what counts as managerialism and to identify how this differs from the collegial response espoused by certain institutions.
- Associated with the above point, questions could be posed about the increase in the number of committees – especially at the smaller private providers. The questions could relate to how new structures change reporting lines within the institution and increase staff participation and institutional learning.

- Similarly, the change in the location of the Quality Office and the change in status of the QAM need further study. As reported in Section B of this report, changes of this kind made at CUT have been welcomed by some staff while others have expressed concerns about the unanticipated consequences of this change.
- Another possible focus could be on the financial commitments required to introduce improvements in terms of additional staff, new resources and equipment. Interviewees in this study were aware of financial constraints on change and development but were rarely able to estimate financial costs. Unless institutions are clear about what it takes to provide for change and build this into their financial planning systems and institutional budgets, it is unlikely that change will occur.
- The increase in student support and resource centres at the two private institutions included in this study has been reported. As these improvements were in response to Audit Report recommendations it would be useful to study the effect of these changes.

Cultural changes

- The language of audit. Section B of the report has highlighted both the difficulties involved in accessing the language of audit in the initial phases and the contention that this language has been adopted and is becoming embedded in institutions. Questions about this shift could focus on facilitating factors as well as the effects of this process on the introduction of improvements.
- While it was reported that the academic voice at CityVarsity was strengthened in the first two phases of audit at this institution, it would be useful to study whether it is sustained over time and what effects it has on mediating the influence of the business voice, especially when the institution is faced with financial challenges in introducing improvements.
- On the topic of identifying and measuring reflection, the question, ‘What is the measure of self-reflection in higher education?’ is one that is proving difficult to answer. In other words, how does one know when staff members are engaged in reflection? A follow-up study on the effects of self-reflection would also be useful.
- Similarly one might ask ‘What is the value of camaraderie and a sense of community?’ and ‘Does this develop into institutional learning and a community of practitioners?’ and ‘If so, what fosters such development?’

New programmes

- Research development programmes for both staff members (e.g. at Rhodes and Mancosa) and postgraduate students (e.g. at CUT) have been highlighted as areas of change. It would be useful to track such programmes in terms of their own processes as well as the outputs.
- Recruitment of African learners from township schools is an area of prioritisation at Rhodes. Here again, it would be useful to track the success of this programme and to follow students through their studies.

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