

HEQC Self-Review Report



*Council on Higher Education  
Higher Education Quality Committee  
October 2008*



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**Higher Education Quality Committee**

**Self-Review Report**

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## **Acronyms**

AC	Accreditation Committee
CHE	Council on Higher Education
CTP	Committee of Technikon Principals
DoE	Department of Education
EQA	External Quality Assurance
ETQAs	Education and Training Quality Assurers
HESA	Higher Education South Africa
HEQC	Higher Education Quality Committee
IAC	Institutional Audits Committee
INQAAHE	International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies for Higher Education
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
NRF	National Research Foundation
PQM	Programme and Qualifications Mix
QPCD	Quality Promotion and Capacity Development Directorate
SAQA	South African Qualifications Authority
SAUVCA	South African Universities Vice Chancellors Association
SERTEC	Certification Council for Technikon Education
SETAs	Sector Education and Training Assurers
QPU	Quality Promotion Unit

## **Introduction**

The political transition in South Africa in 1994 brought a number of direction-setting changes to the policy landscape and implementation systems of all areas of social provision, including higher education. Within the new national framework for South African higher education that was put in place by government, quality assurance was postulated as a policy instrument which, together with planning and funding, was intended to steer the system towards improved quality in all its component elements. Quality education for all was part of a package of social and educational goals and objectives that was set for the system in the post-1994 dispensation. Right from the start, issues of quality were thus linked with broader socio-political reform objectives within higher education and beyond.

The HEQC developed its quality assurance system in a context that took international trends and practices into account while seeking to address national objectives and local needs. In addition to the usual challenges faced by quality assurance agencies, the HEQC had to contend with the inherited legacies of racial exclusion in higher education and the volatility associated with multiple mergers, incorporations and re-designations. Most challenging of all was the legislative requirement to undertake simultaneously both institutional audit and programme accreditation functions, which are philosophically and operationally quite different and equally demanding. These together with quality promotion and capacity development added up to a very large and intensive agenda of work for the HEQC. The approach to quality and quality assurance within an emerging democratic dispensation gave the usual tensions in quality assurance between accountability and improvement the added edge of forging at the same time a connection between quality and equity. It is only against the complex demands of this context that the strategic choices of the HEQC and the constraints under which it has operated can be understood.

In preparing this self-evaluation, the HEQC has taken into account its mandated responsibilities, its mission and objectives as well as its own understandings of quality. It has also used the good practice parameters for quality assurance agencies set out in the INQAAHE Guidelines of Good Practice (2007).

This self-evaluation report is organised into eight sections. Section 1 provides the history of the HEQC since its launch in 2001; section 2 analyses the main characteristics of the South African higher education system; section 3 provides an account of the legislative and regulatory mechanisms within which the HEQC operates; section 4 focuses on the HEQC's governance and operational structures; section 5 looks at the mission and values of the HEQC and explains its understanding of quality assurance, section 6 looks at the core functions of the HEQC and provides an evaluative analytical account of each quality assurance sub-system; section 7 provides an account of how the HEQC manages public information, and section 8 provides an overall conclusion to the self-evaluation. This

document also has 9 appendices that provide further information about and evidence for issues raised in the body of the report.

## **1. Brief History of the HEQC**

The Higher Education Quality Committee is a permanent committee of the Council on Higher Education, which was created through the Higher Education Act No 101 of 1997. Responsibility for quality assurance in higher education is not vested in a free-standing structure but resides as the sole executive responsibility of an organisation that also has statutory advisory and monitoring functions within the higher education system. The allocation of quality assurance to the CHE as one of its responsibilities was informed by the identification in the Education White Paper 3 “*A programme for the transformation of higher education*” (White Paper) of quality as one of the principles on which to build a transformed higher education system.<sup>1</sup> According to the Higher Education Act, the responsibilities of the HEQC are: to promote quality assurance in higher education, to audit the quality assurance mechanisms of higher education institutions, to accredit programmes of higher education and to coordinate and facilitate quality assurance activities within a partnership model with other Education and Training Quality Assurers. To these areas of responsibility, the HEQC Board has added the development of quality-related capacities in the higher education system. The jurisdiction of the HEQC extends to the operations of both public and private higher education providers.

The HEQC was officially launched in May 2001 with the appointment of its first Board and Executive Director and the release of its *Founding Document*. Between its launch and 2004 when it started the implementation of its new systems, the HEQC took over responsibility for some aspects of existing national level quality assurance while at the same time engaging in a number of preparatory activities focused on the development of a new national system of quality assurance. These latter steps included an evaluation of existing arrangements in the country, comparative international surveys, pilots, and regular interactions and consultations with higher education institutions and other stakeholders. During this period, the HEQC produced draft frameworks and criteria for institutional audits and accreditation, conducted a survey of quality assurance arrangements and capabilities at public providers of higher education institutions, and visited all public higher education institutions to learn about their formal quality arrangements and to introduce the HEQC’s work to the senior leadership and academics at higher education institutions. The HEQC also held briefings for the South African University Vice-Chancellors Association (SAUVCA), and its technikon counterpart

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<sup>1</sup> The pursuit of the principle of quality means maintaining and applying academic and educational standards, both in the sense of specific expectations and requirements that should be complied with, and in the sense of ideals of excellence that should be aimed at. These expectations and ideals may differ from context to context, partly depending on the specific purposes pursued. Applying the principle of quality entails evaluating services and products against set standards, with a view to improvement, renewal or progress. (DoE, 1997: 1.21)

the Committee of Technikon Principals (CTP), students' organisations, the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) and professional councils. This period of intensive consultation and the piloting of elements of the new systems helped to improve the functionality of the HEQC's audit and accreditation frameworks and criteria and to prepare a positive atmosphere for the introduction of a comprehensive evaluation system for all sectors of higher education.

In the same year as the HEQC's launch (2001), the government released its National Plan for Higher Education, a document which constituted a blueprint for a state-led restructuring of the public higher education system through mergers and incorporations. The volatility in the system, especially in relation to the new academic and other demands imposed by these processes on higher education institutions was taken into account by the HEQC in preparing for the implementation of its institutional audit, programme accreditation and national review sub-systems in 2004. For this reason, the HEQC started its first cycle of audits (2004-2009)<sup>2</sup> at those public higher education institutions which had not been directly affected by mergers and which had, in South African terms, been historically advantaged with regard to academic and research capacity, staff and student profiles as well as educational infrastructure.

At the start of its activities, the HEQC organised its work into three directorates: Programme Accreditation and Co-ordination, Institutional Audits, and Quality Promotion and Capacity Development. However, the necessity for a fourth directorate for national reviews soon became clear following the re-accreditation of MBA programmes in 2003-4 and a national review of Masters in Education programmes undertaken in 2005. The enormous benefits flowing from the above exercise together with the huge planning, organisational and administrative tasks associated with this form of accreditation led to the creation of a National Reviews Directorate in 2006. The new Directorate was tasked with the responsibility of carrying out the second phase of a review of academic and professional programmes in education as well as undertake reviews in new programme areas to be identified in the future.

More recently, the HEQC Board has realised that specialist attention had to be given to the coordination of quality assurance activities in an environment of overlapping and contested quality assurance jurisdictions. It was also necessary to address in a systematic way the development of appropriate relationships with different type of stakeholders. It has therefore created the portfolio of coordination and stakeholder affairs located in the office of the Deputy Executive Director, which is itself a new position created by the HEQC Board in 2007.

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<sup>2</sup> In 2006 the cycle was extended to 2010 as the HEQC realised that the human resource and logistical demands of the audits would not permit the carrying out of more than five audits per year.

As a new statutory structure within an evolving higher education dispensation, the HEQC has sought to ensure a high degree of visibility, accessibility and sharing of information, consonant with its capacity and resources. It engages regularly with staff and students at public and private higher education institutions in the discharge of its statutory and developmental responsibilities. The HEQC also interacts with a number of government departments, professional councils, and other stakeholders of higher education in a variety of formal and informal relationships.

## **2. The South African Higher Education System and Quality Assurance**

This section provides a brief overview of the context in which the HEQC's quality assurance system was conceptualised and implemented. The overview is intended to situate the HEQC's strategic choices and the challenges facing it in operating its systems.

In 1994 the South African higher education system was a deeply divided and fragmented one, reflecting the racial and other cleavages of apartheid. The different sectors had associated with them a number of perceptions and realities about the acceptability or otherwise of the quality of education offered by each. The ability to make well founded judgments about quality and quality assurance was hampered by the lack of a common set of reference points to define and assess quality across all of higher education. The public sector consisted of 36 institutions (21 universities and 15 technikons), whose identities and organisational functionalities had been shaped by the exclusionary logic of the apartheid state.<sup>3</sup> Besides their racial and ethnic character these institutions were also different in terms of their academic and research focus, their academic infrastructure and their staff capacities. While all universities were allowed to offer degrees at undergraduate and postgraduate levels in general and professional areas, technikons provided technical and vocational education at diploma and certificate level. They started offering degrees only in 1995. Currently the public higher education sector has a total headcount enrolment of 740,000 (2006 figures)<sup>4</sup>. In addition to the public higher education system, a private higher education system was also beginning to expand in the country, although from a very small base. In 1995, the National Commission on Higher Education estimated that, at the time, there were 150 000 students enrolled in the private higher education system, pursuing mostly certificates and diplomas in vocational fields. Currently, there are approximately 70 private higher education institutions with varying numbers and a range of programme offerings, whose total enrolments are estimated at below 100,000 students. At the time (before the setting up of the HEQC), given the absence of any educational track record of many of these private providers, the new

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<sup>3</sup> In terms of institutional types, the inherited system consisted of universities and technikons, the latter providing vocational and technical education. All of these institutions were segregated along racial and ethnic lines with English and Afrikaans being the languages of instruction depending on the history of the institution and the composition of the student body and the academic staff.

government focused on the development of a regulatory framework that could ensure the viability and quality of provision offered. (CHE, 2003, p.7) Eventually, many of the quality processes put in place by the government were superseded by the requirements of the HEQC, for both public and private higher education.

In 2001, in the government's National Plan for Higher Education, the then Minister of Education set out details for the restructuring of the higher education system based on mergers, incorporations and re-designations. One of the main objectives of this reform was to undo the apartheid landscape of higher education and its effects in terms of racially exclusionary identities and skewed allocations of academic and infrastructural resources. The restructuring reduced the number of higher education institutions to 23 and introduced a new classification of institutions into conventional universities, comprehensive universities and universities of technology.

Against this background and taking into account the general policy goal of developing a single coordinated higher education system, the HEQC set out to build a quality assurance system which would make possible the achievement of quality education throughout the entire higher education system rather than only in privileged parts of it. The broad parameters and benchmarks of the system were to apply to public and private higher education institutions, historically advantaged and historically disadvantaged institutions, universities and technikons, and local and foreign providers, while taking sectoral and institutional specificities into account.

At the time of the launch of the HEQC in 2001 there was no comprehensive system of external quality assurance in South Africa which encompassed public universities and technikons and private providers within a single coordinated system. While the technikon sector had been subject to the external scrutiny of a statutory body (SERTEC) since 1987, the university sector had not had an equivalent experience of quality assurance.<sup>5</sup> In 1995, SAUVCA created the Quality Promotion Unit (QPU) in the university sector which initiated a voluntary and collegial programme of institutional audits. Due to a variety of difficulties and disagreements about the work of this unit, SAUVCA closed the QPU in 1999 after it had completed only five audits. However, despite the absence of a national external quality assurance system, a number of pockets of quality assurance existed. Universities were not self-accrediting institutions and new programmes had to be approved by the Association of Universities and Technikons and the Department of Education. Some higher education institutions also had internal systems of quality assurance which included periodic external reviews of departments and research centres and a system of external examiners. However,

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<sup>5</sup> The Certification Council for Technikon Education (SERTEC) was created in 1987. Its quality assurance activities focused mostly on programme accreditation. In its last years, it started focusing on institutional audits as well.

internal quality assurance was uneven across and within institutions both in terms of the methodology, frequency and effectiveness of evaluation. In the case of private providers, institutions were registered with the Department of Education if they met a number of criteria in terms of viability. With the creation of the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) in 1995, private and public providers of higher education had to submit their new programmes to SAQA to be recorded on the NQF, without any accompanying quality credential.

### **3. Legislative and Regulatory Framework**

At a general level, the HEQC operates within the strategic framework for higher education set out in the White Paper. This document signalled the necessity for the creation of a quality assurance system, which eventually found expression in the Higher Education Act of 1997. The approach to quality has to be located within the White Paper's position on the purposes of higher education in South Africa. These purposes encompass both individual development needs and aspirations as well as societal ones like labour market needs and the creation of a critical citizenry. The White Paper identified quality as a crucial principle which should inform the development of the higher education system and as a steering mechanism, which together with funding and planning was going to facilitate transformative change in the higher education system.

At a formal level the HEQC conducts its work in accordance with the stipulations of the Higher Education Act of 1997. This Act created the Council on Higher Education and also laid the basis for a host of national policies and legislation which regulate education and training in South Africa. The HEQC is also subject to other legislation. Among these are the SAQA Act of 1995 which established the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and the SAQA Regulations of 1998 (Government Gazette, No 19231), which govern the relationship between different education and training quality assurers operating in the general and further education and in the higher education bands of the NQF. The need to comply with SAQA's regulations led to an external audit of the HEQC by SAQA in November 2003. This compliance audit was conducted within the requirements of SAQA's objectives for the development and implementation of the NQF and the role of the HEQC in contributing to these objectives. The HEQC was found to be largely compliant with SAQA's requirements.

The legislative framework which underpinned the implementation of the NQF was subject to considerable debate and contestation within the higher education system on account of concerns about the emergence of an overly complex bureaucracy. A government-initiated review of the NQF was started in 2001. It has taken the most part of the following seven years for this process to be settled in the form of an amended legislative framework. The instability and contestation around the existing policy framework made the work of the HEQC particularly difficult in the area of accreditation and coordination. Constant

engagement in an effort to forge a good working relationship with SAQA and other stakeholders helped to ensure that the work of the HEQC in this area was carried out with a reasonable degree of effectiveness.

As indicated previously, the HEQC is the only permanent committee of the CHE. The CHE operates as a national entity under Schedule 3A of the Public Finance Management Act (PFMA, Act 1 of 1999) as amended. It adheres to principles of good governance and accountable financial and performance management, as required of all public sector organisations. The reports of the HEQC form part of the CHE reports which are tabled quarterly and annually to the Parliament of the country through the Department of Education (DoE). The executive management of the CHE is invited to attend meetings of the Parliamentary Committee on Education twice a year, to present its business plan and to submit its annual report. The work of the HEQC is thus subject to all formally required fiduciary, performance and reporting requirements as outlined above.

#### **4. The HEQC's governance, decision-making and operational structures**

There are two oversight structures within the CHE—the CHE Council and the HEQC Board. There is a clear division of labour between these two structures in relation to the quality assurance mandate. The Higher Education Act stipulates the composition of the CHE. It makes provision for a chairperson, thirteen ordinary members, a maximum of three co-opted members and six non-voting members. The Minister of Education appoints the members of the CHE following a public call for nominations from higher education stakeholders and the general public. Members are appointed for a four-year period and the chairperson for five years. The members of the CHE are appointed in their own right as people with specialist knowledge and expertise on higher education matters. In this regard, and despite the fact that the members of the CHE are drawn from various constituencies, the CHE functions as an independent expert statutory body rather than as a body of delegates or representatives of organisations, institutions or constituencies.

The HEQC has its own Board of thirteen members with two CHE representatives on it, one of whom is the chairperson. HEQC members are appointed by the CHE on the basis of nominations from interested parties in higher education. All HEQC members are appointed in their own right for a three to four year period. As with the CHE, Board members are not representatives of different sectors or organisations although sectoral balance is taken into consideration in the composition of the Board. Board members bring expertise from different stakeholder domains to the decision-making processes of the HEQC. Regular progress reports are submitted to the CHE through the Executive Director who is an *ex officio* member of the CHE. The Chief Executive Officer of the CHE is an *ex officio* member of the HEQC Board.

The HEQC Board has full and final decision-making powers in relation to quality assurance and quality promotion policies, strategies, systems and quality judgments. It has delegated power from the CHE in respect of the HEQC budget, organisational structure and staffing appointments up to director level. The HEQC Board has provided active oversight for the development of the quality assurance system to date. All HEQC policy frameworks have been discussed, amended as appropriate and signed off by the Board. The chairperson and Board members accompanied the HEQC ED and members of the Secretariat in the initial visits to higher education institutions and participated in briefings to different organisations and stakeholder groups. Given the demands of the early development phase, the Board met every two months until 2005. Currently the Board meets five times a year and its EXCO meets nine times a year.

In order to discharge its responsibility more effectively and efficiently the Board has constituted a number of specialised committees:

- Executive Committee, (EXCO): this committee is composed of Board members and is chaired by the Chairperson of the Board. It meets in between Board meetings to take urgent decisions and monitor the implementation of the HEQC's quality assurance system and expenditure.
- Accreditation Committee: this committee is composed largely of external people and chaired by the Chairperson of the HEQC Board. It makes recommendations to the Board on the accreditation of programmes. The committee has 16 members, the majority of whom are specialists in the area of programme design and curriculum. The committee includes three representatives from the DoE who are responsible, respectively for private providers, teacher education, and the Programme and Qualifications Mixes agreed upon with each public higher education institution in terms of funding. Accreditation decisions are both impacted on as well as influence the work in all three of the DoE areas indicated above. The recommendations of the Accreditation Committee are submitted to the Board in the form of minutes. The Chairperson of the Accreditation Committee presents the recommendations to the full Board which makes the final decision on each programme.
- Special Accreditation Committee (National Reviews): This committee is composed mainly of external people who are peer specialists in the field. It is chaired by the Chairperson of the HEQC. Its function is to recommend accreditation decisions to the HEQC Board in relation to national reviews. The number and composition of this committee varies according to the subject of the national review.
- Institutional Audits Committee: This committee is composed of senior higher education academics and administrators in the areas of research, teaching and learning, planning and finance and is chaired by a member of the HEQC. The function of this committee is to review draft HEQC audit reports before they are submitted to institutions for comment. The

committee also analyses, comments on and provides inputs on the improvement plans submitted by higher education institutions after they receive their final audit reports. All audit reports are approved by the full HEQC Board.

At each full meeting the Board receives an overall executive report on the planning, activities and operations of the HEQC as well as detailed reports on each area of work. A financial report and a report on human resources are tabled at each meeting of the Executive Committee of the Board and at each meeting of the full Board.

How are peers involved in the decision-making processes of the HEQC? The HEQC's quality assurance system is dependent on the close and substantial participation of peers in most respects. However, it is not a pure peer review system where peers make all final quality related decisions. Peers in the HEQC system are academics, researchers and senior managers from higher education institutions who take part in the quality assurance system in different capacities. They have been involved in the development of criteria and frameworks for programme accreditation and audit, and in the development of criteria for each specialised national review. The more direct involvement of peers is, of course, in their participation in audit panels and national reviews panels where they interact directly with their counterparts at higher education institutions. Peers are also involved in the assessment of programmes for accreditation. Peers take part in decision-making processes to determine the outcomes of quality assurance processes through their involvement in structures such as the Accreditation Committee, the National Review External Moderating Committee and the Institutional Audits Committee. Finally, peers are involved in capacity development and quality promotion activities in which their experience of the quality assurance system is used as an important component, particularly in the training of auditors. In order to ensure that higher education institutions feel comfortable with the peer reviewers proposed for them all national reviews and institutional audit panels are submitted to the institutions for their approval prior to the site visits.

In the current cycle, peers are drawn mainly from senior levels of academic and administrative expertise located in local public and private higher education institutions and universities abroad. Every audit of a public institution has an international expert present on the panel. The HEQC has also drawn on expertise located in the Science Councils, the Academy of Science and the National Research Foundation, the latter of which is the most important public funder of research in higher education. There are, as yet, no employers or people from industry councils or civil society organisations in the review panels. Employers are, however, interviewed as part of the audit process, which enables them to indicate their satisfaction or otherwise with the graduates of an institution. Civil society organisations also have the opportunity to indicate their views about the contribution of higher education institutions in audit interview processes. Students are also not involved in review panels at the moment although someone from the student sector sits on the HEQC Board and students

are extensively interviewed in all audit and accreditation processes. The involvement of students, employers and industry and civil society participants in different aspects of the quality assurance system is a policy issue that will receive attention in preparation for the next cycle of the HEQC's work. In the case of students, the HEQC has been working on a programme to increase student involvement in quality issues. See section 6.3.

Over eight years of existence, two successive HEQC Boards under the same chairperson have provided oversight for all quality assurance activities, monitored the quality and effectiveness of the work in the different functions of the HEQC (including the review of existing policies and procedures), discharged all delegated responsibilities in relation to the allocated budgets, and provided overall support to the work of the HEQC secretariat.

In relation to governance matters, two under-addressed issues still requiring attention are: the gazetting of HEQC regulations by the DoE which will give the force of law to HEQC decisions; and the development of a framework for the Board to evaluate its own performance periodically. In the area of the regulations, the HEQC is currently working with the CHE lawyers to finalise the draft regulations which will be tabled at the CHE Council for its consideration and approval at the end of 2008 before submission to the DoE. In terms of the evaluation of the performance of the Board, a new Board in due to be inducted in February 2008 and performance evaluation and its requisite methodology will be one of the items for discussion during a two-day planning workshop.

#### **4.1 Planning, budget and operational structure**

As part of the CHE, the HEQC plans in three-year cycles which follow the Medium Term Expenditure Framework of the National Treasury. Plans include a situation analysis of the organisation as well as of the higher education system, the setting of overall strategic goals and objectives in the context of the 2004-2010 cycle of quality assurance, and the setting of goals and deliverables for the four directorates of the HEQC. The CHE's strategic plan includes a risk analysis and the HEQC has updated its risks every year and adjusted its control mechanisms accordingly.

The largest part of the CHE budget comes from its government allocation. This, however, was not always the case. Until fairly recently, a large proportion of the HEQC work in specific projects was funded through donor funding. The Ford Foundation, the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID), and Carnegie Corporation contributed generously to the work of the HEQC in its initial years, particularly in terms of the development of policy frameworks and criteria and the capacity development work. While it was viable to apply for and obtain donor funding for the developmental phase of the work of the HEQC, the implementation phase required the government to fully fund the

HEQC's quality assurance activities. Thus the HEQC budget increased from just above R2.3 million, in 2001 to a budget of around R16 million in 2007.

Since its inception the CHE (and the HEQC as the largest part of it) has received unqualified audits from the office of the General Auditor. The CHE finances are overseen by an Audit Committee, which is constituted by external members.

The HEQC reports on its finances to the EXCO of the Board and to the full Board in each meeting. Details of the expenditure of the HEQC are also submitted to the CHE Council as part of the regular financial reporting by the Chief Financial Officer.

The costs of quality assurance for the public higher education system are to a large extent absorbed by the HEQC through its state grant. The HEQC does not charge public higher education institutions for undertaking institutional audits or programme accreditation. In the case of private higher education institutions, the HEQC operates on a partial cost recovery basis. The HEQC charges private providers a fee and the direct costs of the quality assurance, e.g., evaluators' fees, transport, etc. Fees do not include indirect costs or HEQC personnel time. One of the possible changes being investigated by the HEQC is a new costing system for private providers. Given the high proportion of HEQC time and work devoted to private providers, especially in the area of accreditation, a full cost recovery model is being explored as well as an assessment of the HEQC's own efficiency and effectiveness in this area of work.

The operational structure of the HEQC reflects the specified mandate areas of the quality agency according to the Higher Education Act but also the tasks and responsibilities prioritised by the Board in response to the historical and contextual challenges in South African higher education. These are:

- The Programme Accreditation Directorate
- The National Reviews Directorate
- The Institutional Audits Directorate
- The Quality Promotion and Capacity Development Directorate
- The Co-ordination and Stakeholder Affairs Portfolio

The structure and functions of the different portfolios within the HEQC will be discussed in detail in section 6.

The work of the HEQC is overseen by the Executive Director who is responsible for providing intellectual leadership and final operational control.

Despite their different functional focus areas, the directorates, nevertheless, interact and exchange information on a regular basis. The HEQC ED, Deputy ED and directors meet

every six weeks to coordinate activities, monitor progress in different projects, and ensure that all sub-systems of the HEQC operate in a coherent and integrated manner.

In the discharge of its responsibilities, particularly in preparation for the institutional audits and national reviews of programmes, the HEQC uses studies of the higher education system which analyse institutional contexts and performance in the areas of teaching and learning and research. In order to obtain this information, the HEQC interacts regularly with the Monitoring and Advice Directorate of the CHE which is responsible for the production of quantitative and qualitative analyses of individual higher education institutions (institutional profiles) and of different aspects of the higher education system. Conversely, the HEQC's work provides a vast amount of information and insights about the functioning of higher education institutions which are increasingly being used by the CHE for the production of advice to the Minister of Education, in its capacity as a statutory advisory body.

## **5. Mission, values and approach to quality**

In its *Founding Document* the HEQC sets out the following mission and vision:

“The HEQC is committed to a quality driven higher education system that contributes to socio-economic development, social justice and innovative scholarship in South Africa. To achieve this end, the HEQC will support the development, maintenance and enhancement of the quality of public and private higher education provision in order to enable a range of stakeholders to benefit from effective higher education and training. The central objective of the HEQC is to ensure that providers effectively and efficiently deliver education, training, research and community service which are of high quality and which produce socially useful and enriching knowledge as well as a relevant range of graduate skills and competencies necessary for social and economic progress. The policies and programmes of the HEQC will be guided by the above commitments and objectives.”<sup>6</sup>

Given its mandate, the policy context and the legacy of apartheid, the HEQC designed a quality assurance system which included systemic and operational elements that are standard in most quality assurance systems but which was also fit for contextual purpose i.e., a system capable of dealing with issues such as the nexus between equity and quality in relation to educational provision, a system that could address the different ways in which institutional disadvantage was carried over into the new reconfigured higher education system, and, finally, a system which focuses on the quality of provision in the three core functions in a manner in which the link between social justice imperatives and academic standards could be made in an intellectually credible and socially responsive manner (Singh, 2006).

The HEQC explicitly committed itself to advancing the related purposes and goals of the White Paper on Higher Education (*Founding Document*, p. 6). Based on the local context and

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<sup>6</sup> Higher Education Quality Committee, *Founding Document*, CHE, Pretoria, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2004, p. 5.

its imperatives as well as taking into account international trends in external quality assurance (EQA), the HEQC proposed a conceptualisation of quality as fitness for purpose, value for money and transformation within a fitness of purpose framework based on national goals, priorities and targets (*Founding Document*, p. 9).

The HEQC linked the concept of transformation as an emancipatory socio-political change process and transformation individual change process and argued that the *fitness for purpose* of higher education institutions, i.e., what institutions do in relation to the three core functions was a ‘site’ of transformation that was relevant to the achievement of quality:

The HEQC will develop a quality assurance framework that includes an explicit focus on the quality of teaching and learning activities, research and community service in order to deepen and extend the process of higher education transformation (*Founding Document*, p. 9),

The recognition of transformation issues specific to teaching and learning, research and community engagement – and the notion that quality assurance could be a tool to “deepen and extend” higher education transformation in relation to its core functions – is reinforced in the HEQC’s *Founding Document* through the distinction between individual and societal transformation. While the one focuses on personal development, the other focuses on the “requirements of social development, and economic and employment growth.” In the HEQC’s conceptualisation of quality, individual and societal transformation are not independent of each other, neither are they different stages of an evolutionary process. The fulfilment of the potential of all individuals who enter higher education cannot be separated from the role that they have in society as citizens, nor can it be seen independently from the role that the skills, competences and knowledge acquired by individuals have in social and economic development. All these dimensions are integrally connected to educational processes that have to be enabling in diverse ways in order to make the desired outcomes possible.

In practical terms, given the very different capabilities and resources available to each institution depending on its history and location in the system, it was necessary for the HEQC to postulate quality as equivalence of at least minimum standards across the higher education system, as a necessary condition for the eventual substantive equality of opportunity for all citizens.

The development and implementation of the HEQC’s approach constituted the first attempt at establishing a national quality assurance system in South Africa whose scope included the assurance of the quality of provision at all higher education institutions irrespective of mission or public and private ownership. The HEQC system includes key elements of quality assurance that are familiar and recognisable in most external quality assurance

systems- accreditation, auditing and quality promotion- and the core methodology used in each of these modalities is aligned with well-established international practice. Nevertheless, the connection between quality issues and social transformation imperatives is a dominant feature of the system. The HEQC is of the view that its contribution to quality assurance resides in making explicit in its criteria and operating systems the notion of ‘fitness of purpose’ as a constitutive element of the definition of quality, and its attempt to link quality and quality assurance to the socio-political objectives of higher education as much as to its intellectual purposes.

One of the really demanding aspects of the South African experience of quality assurance is that the HEQC started its work in a context where there was a very large measure of restructuring volatility, where planning and implementation capacity levels differed enormously among institutions due to inherited legacies, and where questions of quality assurance jurisdiction were still unclear, with multiple, often conflicting demands being made on institutions. It became the HEQC’s simultaneous responsibility both to implement EQA with rigour while facilitating the development of relevant internal quality assurance capacities within institutions. The role of the HEQC in capacity development and quality promotion will be analysed in detail in section 6.3.

Given these constraints, the implementation of the HEQC system had many teething problems, some of which, unsurprisingly, have not been fully resolved. These will be pointed out in the analysis of the HEQC’s work in the area of audits and accreditation. In operating within these constraints, a strength of the HEQC has been the rapid, often pro-active identification of problems and the fairly high levels of responsiveness to addressing these problems. This has become particularly evident in, for example, the improvements and corrective procedures in successive audits after the receipt of feedback from both audited institutions and audit panels. Particularly valuable in this regard have been the observations and suggestions made by international auditors with experience of other EQA systems. In the area of accreditation, the HEQC has been generally open to an acknowledgement of problems in the processing of applications and to correcting these problems where it warranted. This was made possible, among other things, by acting on information from the systematic conduct of pilots, feedback from workshops, evaluative tracking of implementation in all areas of work, and close co-operation and interaction with institutions and academics. The HEQC has often demonstrated its readiness to implement improvements and changes based on evaluations and feedback, with the HEQC Board exercising close monitoring oversight for all the activities of the agency.

After eight years of work, there is evidence that the HEQC’s quality assurance system is having some impact on the way in which higher education institutions themselves approach quality assurance. Information from institutions that have been audited indicate the ways in which the HEQC’s work has influenced the development of internal quality assurance

systems. Self-evaluation portfolios submitted in preparation for the institutional audits show that many institutions have modelled their internal reviews on the HEQC's frameworks and criteria. In the area of national reviews, for example, the Deans of Education of all public higher education institutions that were involved in the re-accreditation of academic and professional programmes in education, agreed to continue on their own with a review of those programmes not included in the HEQC re-accreditation exercise because they found the experience useful. There is evidence that the HEQC has become fairly well-known internationally, partially because of its firm and clear stand on cross-border provision,<sup>7</sup> but also because of the active participation of members of the HEQC secretariat in a number of international fora on quality assurance and higher education.

At the national level, the HEQC has participated in several task teams and committees dealing with different aspects of higher education and science and technology policy in South Africa. The HEQC's views are sought in a number of fields such as the implementation of an AIDS policy for higher education, the revitalisation of the humanities and social sciences in South Africa, the evaluation of the quality of South African scientific journals, etc. The work of the HEQC has also led to independent research analyses which have drawn varying conclusions as to the effectiveness and soundness of the system, some of which the HEQC has used to reflect on and improve its system.

## **6. The HEQC Mandate Areas and Activities**

### **6.1 Auditing quality assurance mechanisms at higher education institutions**

This area of responsibility, which includes both public and private providers,<sup>8</sup> is located in the Directorate: Institutional Audits. The Directorate has a staff complement of eight, a director, two managers and five administrative staff. The directorate relies on academic and senior management staff from higher education institutions to constitute audit panels and to produce draft audit reports. While auditors are not remunerated, report writers are employed by the HEQC on a consultancy basis.

The HEQC commenced its first institutional audit cycle in 2004. It has completed audits of 15 public higher education institutions and 11 private providers of higher education.

The *Framework for Institutional Audits* (2004) and the *Criteria for Institutional Audits* (2004) constitute the formal parameters for the carrying out of audits. The final version of the HEQC Audit Manual was published in 2007, but draft copies were made available for institutions that were preparing for audits well before this date. It provides an integrated view of the whole audit process step by step from the perspective of the institution as well as the

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<sup>7</sup> In the context of the national review of the MBA in 2003-2004, several foreign providers offering MBAs in South Africa had their programmes de-accredited because they did not meet the HEQC criteria for quality.

audit panel. The primary purpose of institutional audits is “to facilitate systematic and continuous quality development and improvement in higher education and enhance institutional capacity to plan, act and report on quality-related objectives and achievements” (HEQC, 2004a:5). Audits seek to assess the institutions’ capacity for quality management<sup>9</sup> of its academic activities in a manner that meets its specified mission, goals and objectives and engages appropriately with the expectations and needs of various internal and external constituencies.

The HEQC audit system has the following objectives:

- a. Encourage and support higher education providers to maintaining a culture of continuous improvement by means of institutional quality processes that build on HEQC and institutionally set requirements;
- b. Validate the self-evaluation reports of institutions on their quality arrangements for teaching and learning, research and community engagement;
- c. Enable higher education institutions to develop reliable indicators that will assure institutional stakeholders and the HEQC that their policies, systems, strategies and resources for assuring and enhancing quality in teaching and learning, research and community engagement, are effective;
- d. Provide information and evidence that will enable higher education institutions and the HEQC to identify areas of strength and excellence as well as areas in need of focused attention for planned improvement in the short, medium and long term; and
- e. Enable the HEQC to obtain baseline information in the targeted areas through the use of a common set of audit criteria for all institutions.
- f. (HEQC 2004a: 6)

The *Framework* re-stated the HEQC approach to quality, indicating that, while due consideration would be given to mission differentiation and operational diversity, audits were going to focus on how institutions manage the quality of their core functions in a way that addressed transformational challenges for the development of individuals and the requirements of socio-economic development. Audits would consider the relationships between quality, fitness for purpose and fitness of purpose, and the manner in which the institution’s mission and activities took account of national priorities and needs in providing quality education (HEQC 2004a: 5). The HEQC indicated that audits would be guided by the principle of linking the achievement of quality to transformation, broadly understood as encompassing both social and educational objectives pertinent to quality.

These understandings were given expression in 19 audit criteria which addressed two broad areas: a) the mission of the institution; links between planning, resource allocation and quality management, and b) teaching and learning, research and community engagement. These criteria function as evaluative tools to be used by the institution for the purposes of

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<sup>9</sup> Quality management includes quality assurance, quality support, quality development and enhancement and quality monitoring.

self-evaluation, and by the panel and the quality assurance agency to carry out the external evaluation.

The HEQC audit methodology is a fairly standard one for institutional evaluations. It includes a self-assessment exercise conducted by the institution and a site visit by an audit panel. The panel has the responsibility of validating the self-evaluation through intensive interactions with a broad range of individuals, including senior management, students, academic staff, support staff, unions, employers of graduates, and research and community partners.<sup>10</sup> The site visit is followed by an HEQC audit report with recommendations for improvement and commendations on good practice, based on which higher education institutions are expected to produce an improvement plan. The improvement plan is analysed and commented on by the Institutional Audits Committee (IAC) of the HEQC. The HEQC Secretariat engages institutions on their improvement plans based on the comments provided by the IAC. Higher education institutions are expected to produce a mid-term report after three years of the implementation of the improvement plan. In these follow-up steps lies the HEQC's intention to close the loop in the quality cycle in audit and provide the opportunity for ongoing interaction between the HEQC and higher education institution on quality related issues.

These are the steps followed by the HEQC in the production and approval of audit reports:

- A designated report writer external to the HEQC but who is part of the audit panel produces the first draft audit report. This draft takes into account the judgments of the panel members and is signed off by the whole panel.
- The panel's report is analysed by the IAC for rigour, accuracy, balance and fairness and is sent in draft form to the institution for comment on factual errors.
- The corrections and comments provided by the institution are analysed and incorporated into a new draft report which has to be approved by the ED.
- This second draft is submitted to the full Board of the HEQC which comments on the rigour, consistency and fairness of the report, particularly in terms of commendations and recommendations. The HEQC approves the final report which is then sent to the institution as an HEQC Board report.

Institutions are encouraged to circulate audit reports as widely as possible within the institution and to engage different internal constituencies in the development and implementation of the improvement plan.

In an attempt to establish the extent to which the purpose and objectives of institutional audits are being realised and to what effect, the HEQC encourages higher education institutions to conduct feedback surveys during the audit visit. These surveys have proved useful during and after site visits in order to understand different perceptions and experiences

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<sup>10</sup> Depending on the size and complexity of the institution, audit panels split into three sub-groups and interview between 300 and 500 people in four days.

of the audit process. The HEQC also commissions research on audits from external research teams. This research is designed to generate information on the kind of effects that the different stages of the audit process (from self-evaluation to the implementation of the improvement plan) were having on higher education institutions, and how this was perceived and operationalised in different parts of higher education institutions. The HEQC uses the outcomes of this research to identify areas for ongoing improvement in the audit system. Two studies have been conducted so far which involved five institutions in the first study (2006) and eight institutions in the second study (2007).<sup>11</sup>

Is the HEQC achieving its objectives in relation to its institutional audits area of mandate? On the basis of the research conducted to date, the HEQC believes that there is evidence that the audit system is achieving to a considerable extent its assurance related objectives. The validation of quality arrangements in the three core functions indicates that institutions are developing indicators for performance and providing evidence of areas of strength and identifying areas in need of improvement. The promotion objective of encouraging and supporting a culture of improvement has been achieved only partially. While institutions acknowledge the impact of the self-evaluation and the audit visit in raising awareness of quality issues and in identifying areas for improvement, the full cycle of self-evaluation, site visit, audit report, improvement plan and monitoring of improvement is not yet completed for any institution. In this sense, it is too early to have a full sense of the impact of institutional audits in developing a substantive “culture of quality” at higher education institutions.

The HEQC believes that audits are also having an impact on the development of quality related understandings and competencies within the higher education system. This is occurring through the participation of academics and senior managers in the audit process as part of audit panels or as part of teams that prepare self-evaluation reports at the institutions. Academics and senior institutional managers who have participated in more than one audit panel have acknowledged to the HEQC the positive effects of the insights and experience which they have gained through their involvement in audit methodology on deepening their knowledge of higher education and even furthering their own careers. Institutions generally agree that the combination of an extended period of self-evaluation and the probing by the panel of institutional claims and evidence during interviews with different layers of staff are particularly valuable experiences that have made institutions think critically about themselves, introduce new ways of thinking about institutional activities and processes, and allowed staff at higher education institutions to share their experiences relating to the core functions.

As in many other systems, HEQC audits are based on peer review and emphasize the importance of corroborating evidence to support quality claims. The requirement of evidence

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<sup>11</sup> The HEQC is still in conversation with the research team in relation to some methodological concerns raised by the 2007 study report.

forced the institutions to gather evidence more systematically in order to substantiate quality related claims and findings (with the added benefit of using such evidence for further planning). The same requirement also forced the HEQC to deepen its own understandings of what constitutes quality related evidence, to be able to guide institutions and train auditors, but most importantly to be able to stand by its own quality judgments. The incorporation of peers in the system sought to provide academic legitimacy in processes of evaluation, retain a collegial dimension in the process and expand the expert resource base available to the HEQC to carry out its mandate.

Halfway into this first cycle of the HEQC's work, staff at higher education institutions remain willing to be trained as potential auditors for panels. Some staff have even agreed to participate in more than one audit, in a context where there is no remuneration for the exceedingly demanding work undertaken by panels. This can be read as proof of continuing support for the work of the HEQC as well as an acknowledgement that there are individual as well as system level benefits that flow from participation in the HEQC's work. The HEQC believes that, to some extent, it has contributed to the development of a sense of "academic citizenship" and collegiality among staff at higher education institutions who make themselves available to help other institutions as part of their academic social duty.<sup>12</sup>

In relation to the audit methodology, the HEQC has been grappling with finding the appropriate balance between the accountability and developmental aspects of quality assurance, particularly in a context in which higher education institutions themselves are at different stages of development, and have very different histories and capabilities. The HEQC has also been aware of the need to strike other balances: between institutional accountability on the one hand and academic freedom and institutional autonomy on the other; and between taking into account the voices of academics as well as managers in the processes of quality assurance. The ways in which these balances are achieved are reflected in the composition of audit panels, the manner in which panels relate to institutions, the way in which audit reports are written and the manner in which the HEQC interacts with institutions in relation to their improvement plans.

The analysis of institutional audit portfolios and the HEQC audit reports produced in the course of 27 audits show that institutional audits have produced rich baseline information about the higher education system. The HEQC has commissioned the analysis of the information generated in the course of the audits of public higher education institutions with three main purposes: a) to identify trends in the higher education system; b) to identify good practices in the three core functions which can be showcased and shared among universities; and c) to identify possible areas of intervention in the new cycle of quality assurance. The

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<sup>12</sup> The development of academic citizenship is not exclusive to the audit system. As will be seen in section 6.2.2, this is also a feature of the national reviews process.

baseline information about the state of the higher education system will also be utilised in the advisory role of the CHE to the Minister of Education.

In relation to areas which the HEQC has regarded as in need of improvement, a main concern, particularly in the early stages of implementation, was the nature and quality of the audit reports. It took the HEQC several audits to come up with a format of report which satisfied the demands for intellectual and evidentiary rigour, sufficient integration of the HEQC's understanding of quality into the arguments and recommendations that were practical and useful for action by higher education institutions. The main problem faced by the HEQC and the institutions was the long time taken by the agency to produce the reports.<sup>13</sup> The HEQC has been actively engaging with this issue right from the start and has taken steps to improve over time. Currently, reports are being delivered within the scheduled five months time frame promised to institutions. The HEQC has found that it is not possible to produce the current quality of reports and take them through the different processes of decision-making explained earlier in much less than five months, given capacity challenges within the HEQC as well as externally. This represents an ongoing struggle for the HEQC of trade-offs between rigour, depth and usefulness of reports to a speedier turn around time that enables institutions to sustain the quality assurance momentum initiated by the audit. The delays in the delivery of audit reports which characterised the first two years of audits had unfortunate consequences for higher education institutions whose quality assurance efforts lost momentum, making it difficult to galvanise staff into action in the development of improvement plans. This, in some cases, also posed risks to the credibility of the HEQC.

A second area of concern is the difficulty experienced by the HEQC in providing timely feedback on improvement plans, engaging with institutions on the implementation of these plans, and, generally, closing the quality loop of the audit system. The fact that the HEQC has not yet developed a framework for the granting of self-accreditation status to institutions, as stated in the audit framework, is another area of concern. (A fuller explanation of this issue is provided in section 6.2) In most cases, the HEQC's delay in delivering reports, analysing improvements plans, interacting sufficiently with higher education institutions or keeping up with the next steps in the planned policy development process have to do with lack of sufficient numbers of professional staff at high enough levels to undertake some of these tasks and the relative newness and intensive demands of the HEQC's quality assurance methodologies. If, for example, the HEQC had been mandated to run only an institutional audit system, without having the intensive responsibilities of accreditation as well, functionality requirements in the audit evaluation methodology would have been easier to meet in fuller respects. Nevertheless, all 26 scheduled audits to date have been carried out,

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<sup>13</sup> The delay in the production of audit reports was more often than not due to the difficulties that appointed report writers found in producing reports which met HEQC's requirements.

brought to completion in relation to the scheduled steps in the process, and the backlog of delayed reports eliminated despite losses of staff at director and manager levels.

The HEQC is keenly aware that the intensity and level of involvement of the current audit system cannot be sustained usefully in a second cycle. Taking into account the experience of the first cycle, the agency is starting to discuss the characteristics and purposes that a new audit cycle should have. The details, however, will only be finalised once all audit reports have been analysed and will take into account the results of the HEQC external review.

## **6.2 Accrediting programmes of higher education**

The South African higher education system offers just above 4000 learning programmes and is faced with a high demand for new programmes which respond to the myriad skill needs identified by different economic sectors. Both public and private providers of higher education compete between and among each other to capture a fast growing demand for education. In this context, the development of a national system for the accreditation of programmes required the quality assurance agency to make a number of strategic decisions. The HEQC Board decided that it was not possible to put all existing programmes through a (re)-accreditation process. It, therefore, deemed as accredited all existing programmes (on the basis of a variety of screening processes in use before the establishment of the HEQC). It then proceeded to develop an accreditation system which focuses only on new programmes, in order to ensure a quality standard for all programmes entering the system for the first time. In order to ensure that existing higher education programmes were not left completely untouched by the new quality assurance system, the HEQC designed a special type of accreditation to deal with existing programmes.

The accreditation of new programmes was aimed at ensuring that only programmes which met threshold quality levels could be offered, thus protecting students and employers from poor quality and unscrupulous providers. It must be understood that the establishment of a national accreditation system took place against the backdrop of an unprecedented growth in private higher education and a relatively unfettered entrepreneurial drive among some public providers.<sup>14</sup> As will be seen in 6.2.1, the accreditation of new programmes focused on proposals to offer new programmes (candidacy phase) and on the effectiveness of these programmes after they have graduated the first cohort of students (accreditation). This method of a candidacy and a full accreditation phase would ensure that the programmes of higher education institutions would meet minimum standards in relation to requisite educational inputs, processes and outputs over a period of three to five years.

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<sup>14</sup> The number of unregulated partnerships and franchises between public and private providers of higher education reached such a level that the Ministry of Education declared a moratorium on these partnerships in 2001.

In relation to existing programmes, the HEQC took the view that it was necessary to develop an evaluation system which would have high impact on the improvement of quality as well as enhance the capacity of higher education institutions to undertake self-assessment at programme level. With this objective in mind, the HEQC developed the system of national reviews. National reviews are a special type of accreditation focused on existing programmes in a particular discipline and level of the NQF. This type of accreditation is extremely labour intensive in that it requires the mobilisation of institutions, academics and the external quality assurance agency for a concentrated period of time.<sup>15</sup> The differences between the two systems in terms of approach and impact are discussed in the two sections below.

### **6.2.1 Accreditation of new programmes**

This function is managed by the Directorate Programme Accreditation. The Directorate's staff complement is eight- a director, two managers, two administrators and three clerks. The Directorate operates a web-based system of applications (*heqconline*) which has been designed as a tool to manage and monitor the work-flow of applications for accreditation. The system was designed to track the progress of each application, to function as a database of programmes and institutions which allows for system level analyses and to act as a monitoring mechanism for internal quality assurance in the Directorate. As it will be shown later, not all aspects of the design are operational or have had the desired effect on the work of the HEQC. The process of accreditation is informed by the *Framework for Programme Accreditation* (2004), and applies criteria for accreditation set out in the *Criteria for Programme Accreditation* (2004). As indicated earlier, the accreditation function of the HEQC initially included the accreditation of new programmes and the re-accreditation of existing programmes. In the case of private institutions, it also included the accreditation of providers. The accreditation of existing programmes has become a separate area of work, which will be reported on in section 6.2.2

In line with international practice, programme accreditation is based on peer and specialist evaluation and its main purpose is to assess whether an institution can offer a particular higher education programme at acceptable levels of provision in terms of available resources (staff and educational infrastructure), curriculum content, and expected teaching and learning outcomes. Programme accreditation is, therefore, associated with accountability and minimum standards as well as with yes/no decisions. In the South African context, with its heightened demands for access and responsiveness, it was necessary to combine accountability and development within the same accreditation framework. In practice this implied the building of a system which had two stages, one focused on the capability to offer a programme, the other focused on the efficiency with which a programme was being offered

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<sup>15</sup> The full review of the MBA took a year (2003-2004) and by the end of 2005 all programmes which had been awarded accreditation with conditions had met the stipulated conditions and attained full accreditation.

in order for it to continue being offered. Thus, according to the *Framework*, the accreditation process comprises two phases.

Candidacy Phase: The evaluation process requires from the institution a self-evaluation of a proposed new programme against the nine criteria for programme input, and a plan for implementation of the programme. The input criteria cover the areas of programme design; student recruitment, selection and admission; staffing; teaching and learning strategy; assessment policies and procedures; infrastructure and library resources; administrative services; and, where applicable, post-graduate policies, regulations and procedures. The application is referred for desk-top peer evaluation. This evaluation is, if deemed necessary, followed by a site visit which includes some or all of the sites of delivery. If the programme meets the specified requirements, it is awarded provisional accreditation with or without conditions. When conditions are set, the institution is required to submit an improvement plan indicating how they will be addressed. Midway through the term of the first offering of the programme, a progress report must be submitted, and this may, when circumstances warrant it, be followed by a site visit.

Accreditation Phase: Within one year of graduating the first cohort of students from the programme, the institution is required to demonstrate that it has fulfilled all the conditions set by the HEQC during the candidacy phase. It has to submit a self-evaluation report on the programme using the nine criteria for programme delivery and output: coordination, student and staff development, teaching and learning interactions, student assessment practices, and, where applicable, coordination of work-based learning and the delivery of post-graduate programmes. A decision on the accreditation status of a programme is based on a process similar to that outlined for the candidacy phase above, including peer desk-top evaluation and, where necessary, a site visit. The period of accreditation lasts, in the case of one-and two-year programmes, for a maximum of three years and, in the case of programmes with a duration of three years or longer, for a maximum of six years.

Given the fact that accreditation is awarded for a limited period of time, the *Framework* provides for three methods of re-accreditation.

- An institution that has been awarded self-accreditation status re-accredits its existing programmes, where no statutory council is involved. (This is called ‘self-accreditation’ and denotes a status that institutions acquire, not a right common to all institutions by virtue of their legal existence. The HEQC’s Accreditation and the Audit Frameworks see self-accreditation as the final stage of self-regulation. Only those institutions whose internal quality assurance systems have been found effective could be considered for self-accreditation.) The self-accreditation has not become operational yet.
- In the case of professional programmes that also fall within the ambit of another statutory council, the HEQC is in the process of developing appropriate models of

cooperation for the process of re-accreditation, via Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs), to avoid duplicating re-accreditation processes.<sup>16</sup>

- In the case of institutions that do not have self-accreditation status and in respect of programmes which do not fall under another statutory council, the HEQC reserves the right to conduct an evaluation of existing programmes. The process also takes into account the fact that the re-accreditation of private higher education institutions is a requirement for their continuing registration as providers by the Registrar of Private Higher Education Institutions who operates out of the DoE.

The accreditation function of the HEQC complements a number of related functions which are the responsibility of other national bodies.

- SAQA registers a programme offered by a higher education institute (HEI) that leads to a qualification on the NQF.
- In the case of public institutions, the DoE approves the programme and qualification mixes (PQMs) of the institutions, and funds programmes that are accredited by the HEQC.
- In the case of a programme that comes under the authority of a professional council, accreditation by the HEQC is subject to approval by the relevant council.

Some of these issues affect the area of coordination, which is yet another responsibility of the HEQC in relation to system level quality assurance, and to which this report refers later.

The overall purposes of accreditation according to the HEQC *Framework* are:

- a. Assure and enhance the quality of higher education programmes by identifying and granting recognition status to programmes that satisfy the HEQC's minimum standards for provision, or demonstrate their potential to do so in a stipulated period of time.
- b. Protect students from poor quality programmes.
- c. Encourage and support providers to institutionalise a culture of self-managed evaluation that builds on and surpasses minimum standards.
- d. Increase the confidence of the public in higher education programmes and qualifications.
- e. Facilitate articulation between programmes of different higher education sectors and institutions.

Is the HEQC achieving its objectives in relation to its programme accreditation mandate? The HEQC believes that, to a large extent, the implementation of the accreditation framework has helped to ensure that programmes meet minimum standards of quality (a. above). The HEQC is also satisfied that the de-accreditation of programmes that did not meet minimum standards, and in certain cases, the concomitant closure of providers, has protected students from poor quality programmes (b. above). An analysis of the minimum standards

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stipulated for each accreditation criterion shows how these standards can also be used as guidance for improvement. The fact that the judgment about the level of attainment against each criterion ranges from 'does not meet minimum standards' to 'commend' indicates that the system has been designed to encourage excellence and not to focus just on compliance. The approval of the HEQC is cited in advertisements as a reason to trust the quality of programmes being offered, particularly at private providers of higher education (d above) While the HEQC is aware of and vigilant about the dishonest use of its name to lure prospective students, it also receives frequent queries from students and parents about the accreditation status of providers and programmes. HEQC accreditation has consequences beyond the quality issues alone, for example, accreditation of a programme is a precondition for the institutional accreditation of private providers. Likewise, accreditation is a precondition for the funding of approved programmes by the DoE. The HEQC believes that the accreditation system is achieving the objective of increasing public confidence in higher education. Achieving articulation between programmes and sectors in the higher education system (e. above) has been particularly difficult. Some levels of distrust between and among private and public providers have acted as an obstacle to articulation, in addition to more structural problems related to qualifications pathways. In this regard, the goals of the single coordinated higher education system have not yet been achieved. Much more work needs to be done by the HEQC, government, private providers and their counterparts in the public higher education system in order to instill sufficient confidence among institutions as to the reality and value of minimum standards across the different types of higher education institutions.

The HEQC link between quality and the social purposes and objectives of higher education is also present in the area of programme accreditation. Transformation in the accreditation context focuses on both equity and redress as well as curriculum issues. Equity and redress in relation to programmes focuses on forms of access and the available mechanisms of institutional support to ensure that student success is not markedly different across 'race' and gender groups. Ensuring that improved and sustainable quality is embedded in the objectives of higher education institutions and that this is filtered down to learning programmes is a fundamental aspect of programme accreditation.

In the area of programme accreditation, failure to meet minimum standards has serious consequences for continued or new programme funding as well as authorisation to offer a programme. However, minimum standards focused on equity aspects of transformation do not tip the balance in relation to whether a programme gets accredited or loses its accreditation status. This final judgment is predominantly determined on the basis of teaching and learning considerations. Nevertheless, accreditation reports do pay attention to issues of equity by, for example, requesting institutions to develop a realistic strategy to address weaknesses in areas such as student and staff recruitment and support. In this sense, the HEQC has included equity in its accountability framework without entirely subordinating

crucial pedagogic requirements to it. The HEQC *Framework for Programme Accreditation* takes into account the need to build institutional and programme capacity, particularly at historically disadvantaged institutions and new institutions.<sup>17</sup> The outcomes of the process of accreditation include the setting of conditions which institutions have to meet in order to have their programmes fully accepted in the candidacy phase or fully accredited in the final phase of the programme.

The policy of setting conditions for accreditation (where relevant) combines accountability and improvement in the process. While most accrediting bodies and quality assurance agencies indicate areas for attention in relation to programmes, ‘conditional accreditation’ does not seem to be a type of accreditation outcome in other quality assurance systems. ‘Conditional accreditation’ as an outcome forces institutions to concentrate their attention in areas of the programme identified as at risk and in need of improvement. In meeting the conditions, institutions have to demonstrate that their internal structures have the capacity for further programme development. Quality enhancement during the candidacy phase, manifested in improvement plans and progress reports, is an essential aspect of the accreditation process. In the majority of cases, these plans and reports demonstrate that institutions have responded as required, and in ways that indicate that weaknesses evident in applications for accreditation have been or are being addressed.

The HEQC has, to date, not conducted any formal assessment of the impact of programme accreditation on the improvement of quality. The data provided in successive annual reports suggest that the process of accreditation, conducted in terms of the criteria established by the HEQC, has provided a fairly rigorous and effectively bench-marked set of standards that has made it possible to distinguish between programmes that have adequate capacity and quality, and programmes that do not. The fact that there are programmes that do not “pass” the candidacy phase of the accreditation process is an indication that minimum thresholds of quality are maintained through this process. This said, there are a number of technical and operational issues which relate to the HEQC’s internal capacity, which need improvement. There are also issues about the quality of the evaluations produced by peers and their usefulness as guidelines for improvement.

The HEQC does not have a sufficient number of senior staff to provide greater intellectual depths to a process that, particularly in the candidacy phase, has the potential to become mere compliance. The combination of insufficient staff capacity and poor evaluator reports have resulted in some institutions appealing the accreditation decisions, or lodging complaints about the way in which their applications have been processed. Most complaints have been directly addressed by the office of the Executive Director and acted on by the responsible

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<sup>17</sup> On the specific forms of support designed for “historically disadvantaged institutions” see section 6.3. on capacity development activities.

Director. In general, most complaints have been addressed to the satisfaction of all concerned.

In terms of the volume of work in this directorate, the Accreditation Directorate (with its limited human resources) has been able to process and present to the Accreditation Committee, within reasonable time-frames, the flow of applications that has been received. Since the start of the implementation of the accreditation system, the HEQC has managed to improve substantially the turn around time for accreditation decisions. Currently, there is a minimal back-log. However, the quantity of applications has occasionally placed considerable pressure on these resources. This pressure has been affected by expectations of a rapid decision-making process, particularly in cases where private institutions wish to respond rapidly to market-related opportunities. While rapid decision-making may address certain interests of applicants and prevents a back-log of applications, it presents the potential danger of compromising the efficiency and quality of a rigorous evaluation process. The HEQC is in the process of reassessing time-frames for programme accreditation (from the submission of applications to decision-making as well as time taken by institutions in meeting the conditions set by the HEQC) in order to assure consistent quality of evaluation.

The large number of applications for accreditation received, together with an expanding diversity of fields and disciplines represented, poses considerable logistical and intellectual challenges to the process of evaluation (availability of appropriate evaluators, the quality of evaluator reports, and the quality of secretariat processing of evaluator reports to mention three of the most serious ones). The HEQC has commenced with the compilation of a comprehensive data-base of evaluator candidates, to cover the entire range of subjects and their fields of specialisation. This will be followed by further rounds of evaluator workshops, to orientate candidate evaluators to accreditation policy, procedures and standards. The main purpose of this exercise will be to improve the quality of evaluators' reports and therefore their usefulness as the basis on which the HEQC produces feedback to higher education institutions to enable them to improve their learning programmes.

All initiatives to improve the accreditation system in the short- and medium-term will have to be accompanied by a greater conceptual revision of some of the assumptions which informed the development of the Accreditation Framework.

The *Framework for Programme Accreditation* (2004) has, during the last five years, served effectively as a guideline for policy and procedures. During this period, however, there have been significant changes in the higher education landscape, both in the public and private sectors. Certain modifications to procedure, including modifications to the online system, have been introduced to accommodate developments in the sector. Yet, this had not been enough to make the accreditation process more rigorous and at the same time more flexible to the specific needs of different types of providers. The *Framework* establishes a largely

uniform approach to all applications, while the experience of the HEQC suggests that a nuanced approach may be needed to address the expanding diversity of institutional types, profiles and histories, as well as the range of programme fields and levels included within the higher education sector. The HEQC intends to conduct a comprehensive review of the *Framework for Programme Accreditation*, and the tools that support it, such as the online system, to ensure that policy and procedures are capable of responding to this diversity, while at the same time maintaining consistency and reliability in quality assurance.

While private providers of higher education have sometimes felt that the pace and outcomes of the decisions of the HEQC undermine their attempts to be responsive to “market” demands, some public providers are particularly concerned at the lack of resolution in relation to the self-accrediting status. As indicated above, one of the weaknesses in the implementation of the HEQC quality assurance system is that it has not yet been possible to finalise the parameters within which institutions can become self-accrediting for programmes that fall outside the ambit of statutory councils. This delay has been lamented by those institutions whose audit reports have signalled the presence of effective internal systems for the management of quality, and who have already submitted improvement plans. The HEQC expects that, given the experience of both its audit and accreditation systems, it will be able to develop and implement a framework and criteria for the granting of self-accreditation status to higher education institutions in the course of 2009.

Areas for improvement notwithstanding, the accreditation system seems to have had an overall positive impact in raising awareness about quality assurance processes and the importance of teaching and learning particularly among private providers. A study commissioned by the HEQC on the impact of accreditation processes on the quality of provision of private higher education institutions suggested that quality assurance has helped in raising awareness about quality assurance procedures and improved the quality of programmes among private providers. It has also led to a greater measure of confidence among private providers who have had successful accreditation outcomes, especially in competition with public providers in the same programme areas, for example, in the case of the MBA. What is clear in relation to accreditation is that the work of the agency in accrediting or de-accrediting programmes which do not meet minimum standards of quality, has protected students and employers to some extent and improved the quality of programmes on offer at least to minimum standard levels. In the case of public higher education institutions, the accreditation process has helped to create a common ground for the definition of minimum standards of quality across different types of institutions, which, as was indicated in Section 4, constituted one of the objectives of the implementation of quality assurance in the South African context. The work of the Accreditation Committee, based on peer evaluations and stipulated conditions for meeting accreditation requirements has had both a regulatory and developmental effect on the higher education system. The details and complexities of this impact still need to be fully evaluated. The HEQC is planning

to conduct a full study in this area as part of its review of the accreditation system in 2009-2010.

Accreditation decisions directly affect providers. This means that the process of decision-making has to be rigorous and transparent and include the possibility of appeal. The HEQC has developed a decision-making process which combines specialist knowledge with transparency of process. It also provides the opportunity for institutions to make representations and appeals. The HEQC publishes on the CHE website, the processes and procedures relating to accreditation, the dates of Accreditation Committee meetings, and the outcomes of the accreditation of programmes.

The decision-making process in relation to programmes includes the following steps:

- Once the application is received by the Directorate and checked for completeness, it is sent out for peer evaluation. The HEQC has a database of trained evaluators in the different disciplinary domains, which it uses to allocate evaluators to programmes. Every application is usually sent to two evaluators.
- The results of the peer evaluation come back to the Directorate where staff prepares a summary document, which is tabled at the scheduled meeting of the Accreditation Committee.
- The members of the Accreditation Committee discuss the merits of each peer evaluation, especially the consistency between the findings and the existing policy framework and make a recommendation on behalf of the HEQC Board on the accreditation status of the programme.
- The recommendations of the Accreditation Committee are communicated to higher education institutions which have 21 working days to submit a representation to the Accreditation Committee requesting a review of the accreditation decision.
- The minutes of the Accreditation Committee are submitted to the Board of the HEQC for final decision making.

### **6.2.2 Accreditation of existing programmes**

National reviews are processes of accreditation of existing programmes in a particular discipline area and/or qualification level. The responsibility for this activity is located in the Directorate: National Reviews, which, as indicated before, was created in 2006. The staff complement of the Directorate is six staff: a director, two managers and three administrators. While the director and administrators are permanently employed by the HEQC, the managers are employed on fixed-term contracts so as to facilitate the short-term employment of highly qualified academic staff specialised in the discipline that constitutes the focus of each review. In addition to the HEQC and other short-term staff, each national review requires the mobilisation of large numbers of academics specialised in the area of the review who serve

as panel members and chairpersons of panels, and who participate in the different stages of the decision-making process in this form of accreditation.

National Reviews are conducted using the nineteen criteria set out in the *Criteria for Programme Accreditation* (HEQC, 2004 b). These criteria are adapted by expert peers to accommodate the distinctive features of the specific discipline or field under review at any given time. The HEQC has, to date, carried out national reviews of two programmes in different disciplinary areas. One in 2003-4 focused on the MBA, and another in 2005-2007 focused on academic and professional programmes in education. In both instances, specialist groups of academics in the selected area were commissioned to develop the evaluation criteria, taking into account local and international good practices.<sup>18</sup> The criteria developed by these specialist groups were then circulated for consultation and comment among a broader group of peers and experts, and revised accordingly. Final approval for the criteria came from the HEQC Board.

It is the responsibility of the HEQC Board to decide on the subject area and focus of national reviews. The Board deliberations take into account a number of factors, including the strategic importance of the programme to wider social development priorities and therefore the impact that external evaluation could have in improving the quality of graduates in a particular area, and the numbers of students enrolled in the programme.

National reviews have three main components: the re-accreditation of programmes; the follow-up process on the re-accreditation results; and the production of an overview report on the state of provision in a particular programme/or disciplinary area. Each of these components has specific objectives. The re-accreditation of programmes has as its main objective the assessment of whether the quality of provision in a particular discipline area meets minimum standards in order to reassure current and prospective students and employers of the quality of a qualification. As in the case of the accreditation of new programmes, the fact that the judgment about the level of attainment against each criterion ranges from 'does not meet minimum standards' to 'commend' indicates that the system has been designed to encourage excellence and not to focus just on compliance.

The objectives of the follow-up on the re-accreditation results are to make sure that conditionally accredited programmes meet the conditions stipulated by the HEQC Board in order for these programme to become fully accredited, and to check that the quality of provision for pipeline students enrolled in de-accredited programmes is given due consideration.

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<sup>18</sup> In the case of the MBA this included taking account of the criteria used by EQUIS and AMBA.

The overview report on the state of the quality of provision in a particular discipline/programme is based on the results of the entire re-accreditation process. The report has three objectives: the identification of areas of strength and weakness in provision, highlighting good practice, and the identification of trends in local provision taking into account international trends. The HEQC produced a report on the quality of the MBA in South Africa in 2004<sup>19</sup> and is currently finalising a report on the professional and academic programmes in education which were re-accredited between 2005 and 2007.

There is some consensus among members of the institutional senior management and academics who were involved in preparing for the reviews, as well as members of review panels, that national reviews constitute one of the areas of high impact of the HEQC's work. The improvement impact of the national reviews can be seen to some extent in the considerable number of programmes which were initially given conditional accreditation and which eventually became fully accredited once they met the conditions stipulated by the HEQC Board. The fact that programmes that did not comply with minimum standards were de-accredited sent strong signals about quality bottom-lines to all programme areas (not only those under review) but also signalled that programmes could move from meeting minimum standards towards excellence.

What emerges clearly from the experience of the re-accreditation of the MBA and the M Ed is that the success of this form of re-accreditation depends to a large extent on strong peer and expert evaluators with enough knowledge of the disciplinary field and the work environment in which graduates will operate in order to assess programme compliance with discipline/field-specific re-accreditation criteria. However, it was also clear that the process of re-accreditation required some strong cross-cutting governance structures and processes, for example, a form of external moderation which guaranteed that criteria have been applied consistently and with fairness across all programmes evaluated. This was necessary in light of the fact that national reviews involved large numbers of programmes and several different panels assessing programmes across the higher education system.

The HEQC has developed guidelines to enable the Special Accreditation Committee and the HEQC Board to make judgments about accreditation decisions in the context of national reviews processes. These guidelines help to achieve consistency in the recommendations and decisions about the accreditation status of each programme at all levels of the decision-making process.

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<sup>19</sup> Given the popularity and high-stakes nature of the MBA in South Africa, the 2003-2004 national review was very closely followed by the press, and the final report elicited a number of comments, some of them very critical. The HEQC itself published several articles in the press to explain the process and clarify misunderstandings. Staff also published an article in the INQAAHE journal *Quality in Higher Education* reflecting on the experience of the national review.

The following are the structures involved in the processes of evaluation and decision making about the accreditation status of programmes involved in national reviews:

- Panels of peers and experts are responsible for the assessment of the institutions' self-evaluation portfolios and for the conduct of a site visit. At the end of the visit, each panel makes a recommendation on the accreditation status of the programme assessed. Each panel has an appointed report writer who has the responsibility of preparing a report which reflects the rationale for the panel's recommendation. The reports produced by each panel serve at meetings of the External Moderation Committee.
- The National Reviews Special Accreditation Committee comprises senior expert peers in the specific discipline; senior academics with expertise in programme accreditation; representatives from relevant sector organizations (e.g. HESA). Members of the National Reviews Special Accreditation Committee are appointed by the HEQC Board for the duration of a particular review, based on suggestions by the National Reviews Directorate. The Committee is chaired by the Chairperson of the HEQC Board. The purpose of this committee is to approve all the reports and recommendations which will eventually be sent to institutions for comment. The committee is required to focus on the overall coherence and evidentiary basis of the reports (application of the criteria, arguments, evidence, recommendations, and consistency of format). Recommendations by this committee are communicated to institutions which have 21 days to make representations. The representations to the HEQC made by institutions are analysed by the full Board.
- The HEQC Board, forms part of the final stage of the re-accreditation process in which decision making takes place. The HEQC Board has to analyse the re-accreditation reports and the representations made by institutions in relation to the recommendations made by the Special Accreditation Committee. The Board makes final decisions on the accreditation status of the programmes that have been assessed.

Finally, all re-accreditation decisions of the HEQC Board on programmes that have been reviewed are sent to SAQA for endorsement.

As in the case of other HEQC directorates, all the information relating to the framework, criteria, processes and outcomes of a national review are publicly available on the HEQC pages of the CHE website. The outcomes of accreditation are regularly updated as programmes move from conditional accreditation to full accreditation.

It is important to mention that in the case of the recent national review on programmes in education, the HEQC Board took the decision that, given the strategic national importance of certain programmes, a special accreditation outcome needed to be developed to denote that some programmes needed urgent and concerted support to improve their quality. Termination of such programmes through de-accreditation would have severe consequences in those

fields, for example, the production of teachers in a context of acute shortages. The new accreditation category is that of 'programmes at risk of having accreditation withdrawn'. Institutions with programmes in this category receive special support by the HEQC and the DoE in order to ensure that programmes meet minimum standards of quality within an acceptable timeframe.

Given the overall success and impact of this form of accreditation and some of the problems facing the accreditation of new programmes, part of the HEQC review of the accreditation system in 2009 will focus on the relation and possible synergies between these two types of accreditation.

### **6.3 Building capacity and promoting quality and quality assurance**

Many quality assurance agencies include quality promotion as part of their responsibilities. In the case of the HEQC, the Board added to the legislated responsibility of promotion, that of capacity development relating to quality.

In a higher education system with no common experience of a comprehensive system of external quality assurance and in which institutional capacity to implement and participate in an evidence-based and peer driven system of quality assurance was uneven, capacity development was identified by the HEQC Board as an area of priority. This area of responsibility is located in the Quality Promotion and Capacity Development Directorate (QPCD). This Directorate has eight staff, a director, three managers and four administrative staff. The work of the Directorate focuses on both quality promotion and capacity development.

The HEQC understands quality promotion as a set of advocacy, dissemination and research activities that have as their main goal the infusion of an ethos of quality in the three core functions of higher education. It also includes the development of a greater understanding of the different elements of quality among higher education stakeholders.

Capacity development refers to a set of activities designed to enhance the ability of a range of role-players and stakeholders to act in order to facilitate, support, develop, increase and monitor quality in their respective spheres of operation in higher education.

Both promotion and capacity development presuppose a conceptualisation of quality and quality assurance and include a set of objectives, strategies, techniques and procedures, and a programme of activities.

In the area of promotion the HEQC has focused its activities in three main areas: promoting and improving quality in the core functions; promoting discussion and awareness of quality assurance issues among those who are formally responsible for this function at their institutions (e.g. quality co-ordinators); and student involvement in quality issues.

*Quality promotion in the core functions.*

It became clear from the early HEQC interactions with the higher education community that there was a dearth of developmental resources on which staff could draw in order to strengthen activities in the three core function areas. In response, the HEQC put in place initiatives to support, promote and enhance quality in the core functions through the publication of good practice guides on teaching and learning, research, and community engagement. All these initiatives involved HEQC co-ordinated teams of academic specialists who used their expertise in projects that used quality improvement as the vehicle to contribute to the overall development of the higher education system. In the case of teaching and learning, the HEQC launched a programme on the improvement of teaching and learning. This programme involved the participation of a range of higher education specialists in teaching and learning and produced a resource to support improvement in a wide range of fundamental activities in teaching and learning such as curriculum design, assessment, etc. Interactions with staff at higher education institutions indicate that the resources are quite widely used in the development of programmes. In the area of research, a good practice guide for research management was produced. Continuing work in this area is supported by a biannual meeting of all the directors of research at public, and, more recently, some private higher education institutions, which the HEQC hosts in partnership with the Centre for Research in Science and Technology of the University of Stellenbosch. In the area of community engagement, the HEQC entered into a partnership with Community Higher Education Social Partnerships (CHESP) in order to produce a number of resources designed to raise the profile of community engagement as a core function and to improve the quality of work in this area.

*Quality Forum.* Quality has also been promoted through the Forum set up by the HEQC. Forum meetings have been used for the dissemination of information, to encourage direct engagement with the principles and strategies of quality assurance, and to allow for the interrogation of notions of quality. The QPCD Directorate hosts twice a year meetings of institutional quality assurance managers to which it also invites staff responsible for the support of teaching and learning, planning and institutional research etc., depending on the theme of the forum. These activities are differently oriented to public and private providers of higher education. The meetings allow the HEQC to keep in touch with a very important group of stakeholders at institutional level, provide a forum for discussion, sharing of good practices, and identification of implementation problems. Particularly during the preparatory

phase of the work of the HEQC, the hosting of these 'Quality Assurance Forums' provided an important and regular channel of communication between the HEQC and one of its primary interlocutors. Evaluation forms from these activities, filled in at the end of each forum meeting, indicate a fair degree of satisfaction with the meetings and several suggestions have been made to improve these meetings.

*Student Quality Literacy* In the area of student involvement in quality assurance, the HEQC launched early in its history a quality literacy campaign focused mainly on raising awareness of the value of accreditation and the proliferation of 'fly by night' providers (the South African version of the "degree mill"). The campaign, which also included SAQA, was designed to assist students in analysing programme information and to understand the role that different regulatory bodies (DoE, HEQC and SAQA) have in relation to higher education programmes and qualifications. In the last two years the HEQC has been working on the development of a framework to define student involvement in quality assurance. A number of problems outside the HEQC's control delayed the launch of the programme. It is hoped that during 2009 all planned activities will be implemented.

In the area of capacity development the HEQC has been running two programmes: training potential panel members for accreditation and audits, and facilitating the development and strengthening of quality assurance systems for merged and historically disadvantaged institutions.

*Training.* The HEQC, following good academic practice, relies on peer and experts to implement its institutional audit and programme accreditation systems. To ensure the effective participation of academic and senior managers in these systems it was necessary to induct these individuals into the Hensch's quality assurance system and to familiarise them with its principles, tools, processes and procedures. At the same time the lack of familiarity of higher education institutions with a fully-fledged system of external quality assurance in a context of great unevenness in institutional capacity also required some forms of support for the institutions to be able to undertake self-evaluations and to prepare for site visits.

Institutional audits required the training of potential auditors, chairpersons and report writers. The content and organisation of the HEQC's auditor preparation workshops have evolved over time as the audit system has matured. The HEQC itself has learned from experience and new areas for training have emerged through the conduct of audits. The training focuses on providing potential auditors with the necessary tools to conduct an audit. The workshops include opportunities to come to grips with conceptual issues such as the definition of quality and the purposes of quality assurance (including the relationship between quality and broader social purposes) and to develop capacities relating to analysis of the audit criteria, the rationale of the audit schedule, what constitutes evidence and how to use it in making

judgements; what constitute commendations and recommendations, the role of auditors, the chairperson and HEQC staff during audits, etc. Auditor preparation includes simulations and role-playing and takes place over two and half days. With the implementation of the quality assurance system and as institutions and individuals have gained experience, the HEQC has been able to use in its auditor preparation workshops the services of staff from audited institutions as well as from members of audit panels. However, at the beginning of its training work, the HEQC was supported by research consultants and benefitted from the experience and training materials of other national external quality assurance agencies.<sup>20</sup>

The training of chairpersons was considered to be particularly necessary, especially at the time when the HEQC did not have a sufficiently developed audit manual to help the different actors in the process to understand their roles. The chairperson training focuses on the logic of the audit schedule and its relationship with the criteria, the management of the panel, and the role of the chairperson in different situations (in interview sessions, in interactions with the institution, during review sessions) the purpose and characteristics of the oral feedback, etc. The training of report writers for audits has proved to be the most difficult aspect of the training. After some unsatisfactory experiences, the HEQC decided to “professionalise” report writing by selecting a handful of individuals who have demonstrated ability to write the audit reports required in this first cycle of HEQC audits.

Awareness of the institutional context in which the audit takes place constitutes an important aspect of the different types of training for audits organised by the HEQC. Like other developing societies in which higher education systems are unevenly developed, training for audits in South Africa had to incorporate an appreciation and understanding of the different institutional contexts in which quality assurance was to take place, e.g. technikons and universities, historically advantaged and historically disadvantaged institutions, and eventually merged and non-merged institutions. It also had to take account of the fact a new peer community in quality assurance needed to be more diverse in terms of race, gender, disciplinary orientation, levels of seniority, etc.

The legacy of institutional inequality left by apartheid constituted a particularly challenging aspect of the context in which the HEQC had to implement a national quality assurance system. In the case of audits the HEQC accepted that for institutions to be able to be able to fully benefit from the process, certain forms of support needed to be provided. The HEQC developed training and support programmes for institutions that were going to be audited. The purpose of this training was to clarify the objectives of the audit, the rationale of the audit schedule, the importance of the criteria and the open-ended questions, the nature of the interviews and the knowledge and experience expected from interviewees in each session. The training also provided guidelines and suggestions for how to proceed with the self-

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<sup>20</sup> In order to help with the development of appropriate and efficient training workshops the HEQC commissioned a group of researchers in the field of education to attend the training to help identify strengths and weaknesses in the design of the training modules. This resulted in the complete restructuring of the training in order to make it more directly relevant to the audit.

evaluation, what constituted evidence and how it could be used for self-evaluation purposes. As in the case of auditor preparations, once the system commenced implementation, the HEQC could rely on the experience of other institutions whose staff started helping to run the audit readiness workshops. In the HEQC's view, this had at least two advantages. The one was that audited institutions provided a first hand account of their experience of preparing for audits and could reflect on the benefits which they thought they had derived from the self-evaluation process and the audit site visit. The other was that the training created the possibility for the sharing of good practice across institutions and generated a community of expertise on which institutions could themselves draw. The HEQC is aware that some institutions have been helping and advising each other in preparation for the site visit and even in providing a critical reading of the self-evaluation portfolio. One other advantage of the training emerges quite clearly during the audit processes. Panels are able to function together as a team, partially due to the fact that they share the same prior training and have the same points of reference as to the purpose and methodology of the audit.

Training in the area of national reviews is similar to that of audits, given that the re-accreditation process entails the constitution of a panel and a three to four day site visit. In the area of accreditation, the training focuses both on the use of the criteria and familiarity with the online system. In both cases the HEQC includes simulation as part of the training.

*Quality assurance systems development for merged and historically disadvantaged institutions.* This project, which started in 2005 and is currently being evaluated, was supported by Finnish funds from the South Africa-Finland Cooperation Programme. The project had two main objectives in assisting institutions involved in mergers and historically disadvantaged institutions: a) to develop new quality management systems which would enable those institutions to prepare for HEQC institutional audit and programme accreditation requirements; and b) to institutionalise effective quality management at all relevant planning and resource allocation levels and to facilitate self-regulation and eventual self-accreditation. A full account of this project is provided separately, including a final report on the achievement of the objectives of the project.

From its inception the HEQC was aware that the application of a common quality standard could result in a new divide in the South African higher education system with quality as the marker of an unacceptable form of differentiation. The HEQC, therefore, embarked on a comprehensive capacity-development programme in order to ensure that all higher education institutions would develop the institutional capabilities to respond to the common quality requirements of the HEQC. This had been a strategic choice linked explicitly to equity and development objectives in higher education. As can be seen from the explanation provided above, the capacity development and promotion programme targets individuals, institutions and institutional sectors, seeking to equip them with information and skills relating to quality

provision. It is also intended to contribute to the building of a new peer community that is more diverse in terms of race, gender and sector, to encourage academics to exchange information on good practices in teaching and learning, to encourage students to become more knowledgeable about and involved in quality debates and arrangements, and to support institutions to negotiate their way through hugely challenging quality issues in the context of mergers and other mission shifts.

An issue with which the HEQC has had to grapple in relation to its capacity development work is that of its own role as coach, referee and judge in the quality assurance field. In the context in which it found itself, especially in this first cycle, a great deal of the direct capacity development work was unavoidably linked also to the need to disseminate information and understandings about HEQC systems and strategies. The HEQC is aware of the potential role confusions and dangers that could arise in such a context. The HEQC has tried to avert some of these risks by demarcating the operational work into different directorates and by the utilisation of peers and specialist evaluators in the process of adjudication of capacity development grants, such as those included in the project supported by Finnish funds. Similarly, the HEQC has insisted on the non-prescriptive character of its training materials and the lack of a single “winning formula” for the development of self-evaluation portfolios. Overall, it seems to the HEQC that the active role of peers and specialists in the quality assurance system as well as the specialised nature of the decision-making committees, has provided sufficient distance between the role of the agency in the area of capacity development and its role in the facilitation of quality judgements. Given the great differences in context and capacity between and among higher education sectors in South Africa, it is difficult to imagine how a quality assurance agency such as the HEQC could have proceeded otherwise. The HEQC is committed to and has been working with sector organisations like HESA in relation to increasing quality related capacity in the system. The nature and extent of its capacity development work will be reviewed in the next cycle of quality assurance.

Overall, the HEQC is satisfied about the effectiveness of its capacity development programmes in the area of audits and national reviews. Further work needs to be done in the area of accreditation to improve the quality of programme evaluation. The HEQC is fairly satisfied with the effectiveness of its promotion programmes. However, much more needs to be done to effectively and productively include students in quality assurance processes, and to move promotion programmes from a focus on information and experience to a greater preoccupation about enhancement and excellence in the core functions. These, however, will become more appropriate foci for a programme of quality promotion and capacity development in the second cycle of quality assurance. The progress that the HEQC will be able to make in this area will, to a large extent, depend on the caliber of the staff it manages to recruit. In this area of work in particular, lack of professional staff has been a major obstacle for more steady progress.

#### **6.4 Co-ordinating Quality Assurance initiatives in South African higher education**

Giving expression to the goal of creating a ‘a single, coordinated higher education system’ articulated in White Paper 3 in the area of quality assurance was to some extent hindered by the existence of multiple bodies with quality assurance jurisdictions and responsibilities. These were statutory professional councils, non-statutory/voluntary professional bodies and sector education and training authorities (SETAs). The White Paper recommended that a need still existed for the establishment of an umbrella national authority responsible for quality promotion and assurance throughout the higher education system. This body was also to be responsible for coordinating quality assurance in higher education.

Given the contestation around the policy framework regulating the NQF and the very different approaches to quality assurance that characterized the SETAs, professional councils and the HEQC, work in this area has been slow and difficult because of contested jurisdictions and different methodologies. The HEQC has been concerned about duplication and quality overload for the higher education system but has in equal measure not been willing to compromise on its bottom-line quality requirements. The signing of MoUs was an attempt to solve some of the jurisdictional and conceptual problems encountered. The HEQC choose to focus its work in this area in developing MoUs with professional councils. The HEQC has signed one memorandum of understanding with the Engineering Council of South African and has developed constructive relationships with other professional councils.

The main concern of the HEQC in this area, and one which has no doubt frustrated higher education institutions, was the delay in the implementation of the delegated functions. The HEQC has, at last, finalised the framework to guide the allocation of the delegated functions to higher education institutions. The framework is being implemented and the process of decision making will be finalized in the first quarter of 2009.

#### **6.5 International Relations**

From its inception, the HEQC took a strategic decision to participate in international debates on quality assurance in higher education. The rationale for this decision was to ensure that the HEQC, as a new quality assurance agency, could learn from the experiences of more established agencies and benchmark its work accordingly but also contribute to shaping quality assurance discourses, especially in relation to the issues, experiences and needs of higher education systems located in developing countries. This decision was given expression in the participation of senior staff of the HEQC in international conferences on quality assurance in higher education and in the publication of articles in local and international journals and other publications on quality assurance and higher education.

The HEQC has been a member of the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) since 2001 and three members of the HEQC's senior management have served on the INQAAHE Board.

The HEQC has participated in a number of international fora on quality assurance organised by UNESCO such as the Global Forum on International Quality Assurance, Accreditation and Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and the World Bank. The HEQC has also participated in the committee responsible for the development of the OECD/UNESCO Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education (2006). On the African continent, the HEQC has contributed to the development of the Association of African Universities' quality assurance programme (2007). It has also participated in the AAU Leadership Development (LEDEV) Programme where some of its staff members have taught the module on quality assurance.

The HEQC has concluded memoranda of understanding with quality assurance agencies in the following countries:

- Australia – Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA)
- United Kingdom – Quality Assurance Agency (QAA)
- Norway – National Organisation for Quality in Higher Education (NOKUT)
- India – National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC)
- Namibia – Namibia Qualifications Authority (NQA)
- Botswana – Tertiary Education Council (TEC)

These MoUs make possible the sharing of knowledge, experience and information across quality assurance systems and includes participation in the activities of counterpart agencies. Some of these agreements have facilitated the HEQC's access to international auditors who have served on HEQC institutional audit panels.

The HEQC also maintains relations with other international organisations based on common interests in specific activities or projects. Among them are:

- The Mauritian Qualifications Authority (MQA)
- The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA)-USA.
- The National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE)-USA
- The Teacher Education Accreditation Council (TEAC)-USA
- The Post-secondary Education Quality Assurance Board (PEQAB)-Canada

The HEQC frequently plays host to visiting delegations from countries, particularly from the African continent which are in the process of designing national quality assurance systems. Since 2002 the HEQC has received delegations from eight countries. On occasion, the HEQC

has been invited to assist in the induction of newly established quality agencies (e.g. Botswana, Namibia, etc.).

The work of the HEQC in the area of international relations has another dimension more directly related to the implementation of its quality assurance system in South Africa. This is assuring that the programmes offered abroad by South African higher education institutions meet national minimum standards of quality. The South African government has developed a protocol in this regard, but this is not yet operational. Despite this, the HEQC looks as part of its programme accreditation process at the quality of provision in different sites of delivery, including those sites located abroad. While the HEQC's position in relation of cross border provision has been more publicised in relation to the de-accreditation of foreign providers of MBA programmes during the national review that took place in 2003-4, in the same context, the HEQC was instrumental also in the closure of South African universities' sites of delivery in neighbouring countries.

## **7. Reporting on Quality Information**

The HEQC subscribes to the principle of making relevant information about quality assurance available in the public domain as well as to relevant stakeholders as part of the process of building confidence in the higher education system. Like other public sector organisations and as part of the CHE, the HEQC is also subject to the Promotion of Access to Information Act No 2 of 2000. In its early discussions with the higher education community, it was clear that institutions were concerned about potential damage to their development through simplistic and sensationalist media reporting on quality findings, especially in a context where many institutions (e.g. those involved in mergers) were still attempting to build their academic identities and strengths. For this reason, some aspects of the HEQC quality assurance systems have limits on the extent of what is available in the public domain in this first cycle of work. These limits will be reviewed in the next cycle of quality assurance.

All yes/no decisions on the accreditation status of new and existing programmes are available on the HEQC pages of the CHE website. However, the full accreditation reports are not available and remain confidential between the HEQC and the institution for the reason set out above. In terms of the Access to Public Information Act, the HEQC has to comply with the law in making information available, should such information concerning an accreditation report be requested by any affected individual. The forms to request information in possession of the HEQC which is not publicly available can be downloaded from the CHE website.

In the case of audit reports, the HEQC indicated in its Framework that summaries of the final audit reports would be published on the CHE website. Once again, the full reports are

confidential to the institutions and it is within their power to decide on making their contents publicly available. Institutions are urged to make the full reports available to all constituencies within the institution. As in the case of accreditation reports, the HEQC is subject to the provisions of the Access to Information Act with regard to audit reports.

The HEQC, as part of the CHE, reports twice yearly to Parliament. The hearings of the Parliamentary Committee on Education are public and are available in a recorded version on the Parliament website. The HEQC has used its analysis of the data gathered through its quality assurance work to produce, together with the CHE, an integrated briefing on the state of higher education for presentation to the Minister of Education as part of the advice function of the CHE.

The HEQC is fully aware of the importance and richness of information on the higher education system to which it has access through the full range of its quality assurance and promotion activities. Given the public interest in this work, the HEQC has occasionally published newspaper articles on its work and responded to media interest on these issues.

The meta-analysis of the audit reports of 13 institutions which is currently being developed will produce a fairly comprehensive picture of the system. This information will be used by the HEQC itself to identify areas of priority for the development of interventions for the management of quality in the three core functions. The meta-analysis can also provide information for the monitoring of the achievement of the goals of the restructuring of higher education, and highlight areas in which policy development or government support might be needed. The quality assurance information can thus be useful for the CHE's advice and monitoring functions in the higher education system. All these reports are due to be published and will become publicly available on the CHE website as free downloads for use by any interested stakeholder or researcher.

The HEQC is aware that it has not yet focused sufficiently on using its accreditation information to analyse the state of provision in private higher education. Since its first analysis in 2003, no new work has been done in this area. This is also a problem of limited capacity. It is hoped that in the near future the HEQC, in collaboration with the CHE, will be able to develop comprehensive reports on quality and other trends in private higher education sector.

In relation to the HEQC's regular communications and reporting of its activities, the task of updating the website without having a dedicated staff member represented a major challenge for the organisation right from the beginning. Despite the lack of dedicated staff in the area of media and communications, the HEQC has tried to provide as much information as possible to institutions, within the limits of its capacity. The office of the Executive Director produced *HEQC Communiques* which were sent via email to all higher education institutions

in order to inform the sector about developments and plans in relation to each HEQC subsystem.

In 2007 the CHE Council made a decision about the need to develop a media and communication strategy for the whole organisation. The position of media and communications officer for the CHE has just been advertised. It is hoped that the presence of a dedicated staff member will help to improve an important aspect of the work of the HEQC which has not received sufficient systematic and regular attention.

As already indicated, the HEQC has endeavoured to make its processes and criteria for decision-making available in the public domain. To this end the HEQC uses its pages on the CHE website where all its policies and procedures are readily available to higher education institutions and the general public.

What about institutions ability to appeal HEQC's decisions? In those areas in which the decisions of the HEQC directly affect the right of institutions to offer higher education programmes, the HEQC applies the principles of administrative justice as legislated in South Africa and which set out procedural guidelines for the fair administration of justice. This provides for a window period of 21 working days for institutions who disagree with accreditation decisions to submit a representation to the HEQC. These representations are seen in the case of new programme, in the first instance, by the Accreditation Committee and after by the HEQC Board, and in the case of re-accreditation processes by the full Board of the HEQC. Should the outcome of the representation not be satisfactory, institutions can appeal an accreditation decision to SAQA, who will investigate the issue and make an inform decision in terms of process and content of the evaluation. In eight years of work in the area of accreditation, few HEQC decisions all institutional complaints have been solved without recourse to litigation.

## **8. Conclusion**

This document has provided an analytical account of the HEQC's quality assurance system, contextualising its operations within the specific characteristics and challenges of the South African higher education system and the raft of legislation that regulates its work. It has pointed to the evolution of the HEQC in terms of its systems and procedures, operational structures, human resources and finances, and key policy relationships. This document has highlighted the HEQC's opportunities for impacting on quality issues as well as larger social priorities within and beyond higher education in South Africa. It has also indicated the major constraints in the implementation of external quality assurance posed by volatility and uneven capacity in the higher education system itself combined with a lack of sufficient

numbers of high-level professional staff in the agency to carry out a comprehensive and ambitious programme of quality assurance.

Despite the constraints, the HEQC has managed to run its operations and discharged its areas of legislative responsibility without serious challenges to its systems, strategies and findings or major implementation glitches. In giving effect to its mandates, it has developed a system that is 'fit for purpose' in relation to the demands of context, especially in relation to the framing of quality *vis a vis* the imperatives of social transformation in higher education. Since 2005, the HEQC has completed 26 institutional audits,, re-accredited 120 existing programmes through national reviews and processed 488<sup>21</sup> new programmes for eventual accreditation. During this period the HEQC has trained 490 potential auditors, 754 evaluators, 288 staff members of public higher education institutions and 490 staff members of private providers have registered attendance at the HEQC Quality Forums. The HEQC's patchy record in the area of co-ordination is an area of concern which has to be read against legislative and jurisdictional difficulties.

The HEQC has evidence that the development and implementation of its quality assurance system has raised awareness about the importance of giving systematic attention to quality assurance issues at all higher education institutions. The HEQC believes that, particularly in the area of the re-accreditation of programmes, the development, scrutiny and approval of improvement plans has helped institutions in meeting minimum standards of quality at programme level. The HEQC also believes that in the area of the accreditation of new programmes, it has afforded some protection to students and the public from poor quality programmes and opportunistic providers. The HEQC is of the view that institutional audits have made higher education institutions assess their work in a more integrated and planned way and enabled them to identify areas for improvement which has had an overall positive impact on these institutions, despite the onerous preparatory processes.

It is too early to assess the full correlation between the HEQC's work that has led to raising awareness about the need for the systematic introduction of quality assurance at institutional level and any positive effects on improving the actual quality of students' educational experience at higher education institutions or the quality of the South African higher education graduates. Quality assurance is a necessary condition for the production of quality education but it is not a sufficient condition. Sufficient conditions have a great deal to do with institutional will and relevant action on a continuous basis (outside of formal HEQC requirements) as well as the commitment and involvement of staff and students. The HEQC is aware that some of the positive benefits of its quality assurance work relate to the evident impact of first cycles of new quality assurance systems. It is aware that it has to be vigilant about the diminishing returns of successive cycles as well as addressing as far as it can the

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<sup>21</sup> For the total number of programmes processed since 2000, please refer to the CHE Annual Report.

challenge of preventing quality assurance from becoming an exercise in compliance, which will run contrary to the spirit and purposes of the HEQC's Founding Document.

This self-evaluation has indicated the achievements and strengths of the HEQC as well as identified a number of areas which require improvement and review. These planned improvements, together with the findings of this external evaluation, will provide the HEQC with a solid basis on which to prepare for the second cycle of quality assurance in South African higher education, due to commence in 2011.

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