

QEP INSTITUTIONAL VISITS

Quality enhancement is about improving. There are no boxes to tick off. Enhancement is never done. It is a journey. But there are milestones and measures of success on the journey. The QEP has been designed to encourage institutions to reflect on what they do and why, and to use evidence to consider the effects. Key questions for an institution involved in enhancement to consider are:

- Where have we come from?
- Where are we now?
- Where do we want to be in the future?
- How are we going to get there?
- How will we know when we get there?

The QEP has also been designed to promote collective impact across the higher education sector by encouraging sharing among institutions of what they find to be effective in promoting student success, working together on common problems and building capacity in areas key to student success. While institutional contexts differ, all institutions operate within the same broad social and political environment in South Africa and therefore have some commonalities.

The purpose of the institutional visit is to provide a structured opportunity for institutional leaders to engage with peer reviewers external to the institution about the journey they are taking towards improvement in the focus areas selected for Phase 1 of the QEP, the milestones achieved, the challenges encountered along the way and the plans for further improvement. It is also an opportunity for institutions to receive feedback on their engagement with the focus areas and suggestions for what else they might consider doing, or doing differently, based on what is being learned in and with the sector.

The broad frame for the visit is appreciative inquiry, originally developed by Cooperrider and Srivastva¹. According to Kessler²,

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a method for studying and changing social systems (groups, organizations, communities) that advocates collective inquiry into the best of what is in order to imagine what could be, followed by collective design of a desired future state that is compelling and thus, does not require the use of incentives, coercion or persuasion for planned change to occur.

¹ Cooperrider, D.L. and Srivastva (1987). Appreciative inquiry in organizational life. In Woodman, R.W. & Pasmore, W.A. (Eds), *Research in Organizational Change and Development*, Vol.1 (pp 129-169). Stamford, CT: JAI Press.

² Kessler, E.H. (2013) (Ed). *Encyclopedia of Management Theory*, Sage Publications.

AI is a strengths-based approach to change management that uses the “positive core” of an organisation as the starting point for growth and improvement. In contrast to problem-solving – trying to fix what is – it employs a generative method to envision what does not yet exist. While it is impossible for peer reviewers to engage in a full-blown AI process, the institutional visit is intended to focus on the positives as a springboard for thinking about what can be enhanced.

For the opening discussion with the senior management, the main purpose is to provide the context and frame for the visit. Peer reviewers are not evaluators. Unlike in an audit, the peer reviewers’ report will not provide a list of formal commendations and recommendations. Peer reviewers are more like critical friends. Their role is to engage with an institution on its path to improvement. The institutional visit is intended to allow the institution and the peer reviewers to share insights beyond what institutions provided in their baseline and final reports. In some cases, peer reviewers will seek additional information. Institutions may also choose to provide the peer reviewers with additional information.

For the discussions on the focus areas, participants should include not only administrative and support staff but also academics and students. Some institutions appointed task teams for each focus area. It would be useful to meet with these teams, although in places where the teams were large, it is not necessary to gather the entire team.

After the visit, the peer reviewers will draft a report that will be sent to the CHE for editing. The edited report will be sent back to the university for correcting. New information should not be added at this stage. The corrections should be sent back to the CHE within 10 working days. After the corrections have been received, a final version of the report will be produced and sent to the university and to the Institutional Audits Committee of the CHE.

Once the institutional visits have been concluded and the reports completed, the CHE will undertake a sector-wide analysis of the reports in an effort to identify areas of and for improvement in relation to the selected focus areas. This information will contribute to developing quality codes in the service of increasing student success across the higher education sector in South Africa.

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