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## *Communiqué 1*

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*The Functions of the Council on Higher  
Education as a Quality Council: Higher  
Education Qualifications Framework  
(HEQF)*

## 1. Introduction

The designation of the Council on Higher Education (CHE) as the Quality Council (QC) for Higher Education by the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) Act of 2008 (Act No 67 of 2008) has broadened the functions of the CHE. Prior to 2008, in terms of the Higher Education Act (Act No 101 of 1997), as amended, the functions of the CHE covered two main areas:

- (i) Advising the Minister of Higher Education and Training on any aspect of higher education.
- (ii) Quality promotion and quality assurance, specifically, the auditing of the quality assurance mechanisms of higher education institutions and the accreditation of higher education programmes.

However, in its new role as a QC, the CHE has to perform an additional set of functions in terms of section 27 of the NQF Act, which include, amongst others, the following:

- Development and management of its sub-framework, i.e. the Higher Education Qualifications Framework (HEQF) and advising the Minister of Higher Education and Training on matters relating to the HEQF.
- Development and implementation of policy and criteria for the development, registration and publication of qualifications, i.e. standards setting, including the development of naming conventions for qualifications.
- Ensuring the development of qualifications as are required for the higher education system.

The agenda that flows from the additional functions assigned to the CHE is ambitious and complex given the background context, which is fluid and in a state of flux, as well as the fact that it involves initiating a range of concurrent processes to address what are essentially interlinked issues. The HEQF, which was promulgated as policy in October 2007 is in the process of being reviewed even before it is fully implemented – although new programmes introduced from January 2009 have had to conform to the requirements of the HEQF, the alignment of existing programmes has not yet started. Thus the time-frames for the alignment process, which as indicated below is proposed to begin in January 2011, has to take into account the potential impact of the outcomes of the HEQF review, which is planned to be concluded in mid-2011. Although the latter is likely to impact on a limited number of programmes, in particular, diploma programmes and programmes offered by the Universities of Technology, even without any changes to the HEQF, the degree of adjustment and curriculum development required to ensure alignment will impact differentially on the various types of higher education institutions. Similarly, the initiation of the alignment process cannot await the outcomes of

the standards setting process and the development of criteria for naming qualifications, which is in the early stages of conceptualisation.

The implementation of the additional functions should ideally be done sequentially, starting with the review of the HEQF, followed by standards setting and the development of criteria for naming qualifications and ending with the re-alignment of existing programmes and qualifications. The real world, however, is not susceptible to pre-determined sequences in which processes and activities are neatly divided and abstracted from the ebb and flow of daily practice. In line with this, in developing implementation plans for giving effect to the additional functions the CHE has taken into account the necessary complexity in terms of sequencing and potential overlap between the different processes to ensure their overall coherence.

This Communiqué is the first of a series to inform the higher education community of the steps that the CHE is putting in place to implement the additional functions assigned to it as a result of its designation as the Quality Council for Higher Education. It should be noted that this communiqué does not replace and should be read in conjunction with the four Joint Communiqué's relating to the implementation of the HEQF, which previously released by the CHE, Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) and the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA).

The purpose of this Communiqué is two-fold:

- It outlines the process for the review of the HEQF.
- It outlines the proposed implementation plan for the alignment of existing programmes and qualifications in line with the requirements of the HEQF.

The framework and process for standard setting and the development of criteria for the naming of qualifications will be released in early 2011.

## **2. HEQF Review**

The CHE, in its advice to the then Minister of Education in April 2007 regarding the HEQF, indicated that there were “remaining unresolved concerns about the number, nature and purposes of the qualification types” set out in the HEQF and that the Minister should consider a review of the HEQF after a three-year period of implementation. The HEQF was implemented with effect from January 2009 and as we come to the end of the second year, the need for a review is clear. The implementation of the HEQF through the programme accreditation process, which is the responsibility of the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) of the CHE, has indicated a number of inconsistencies and problems that need to be addressed for the overall objectives of the policy to be achieved and which have also been confirmed in representations from amongst others, the Universities of Technology and various Professional Councils. These include, inter-alia:

- The appropriateness of the nine qualification types, including the designated variants, in the light of different institutional missions and labour market expectations, in particular, the lack of a degree variant unique to the Universities of Technology.
- The coherence and consistency in the designation, credit value and pegging of some qualifications in the context of the needs of different professions, in particular, the lack of 240 credit diplomas, which may be required, for example, in a range of auxiliary health professions.
- The articulation pathways between undergraduate diploma and postgraduate programmes in terms of the time required to complete a masters degree, for example, a student with an undergraduate diploma would require two additional years of study prior to being considered for entry into a master's programme.
- The appropriateness of a number of postgraduate qualifications in different professional fields and their international comparability such as the MMed.
- The extent to which the range of qualifications available, in particular, at levels 5 and 6 are appropriate to support the goal of expanded access.

In the light of the issues highlighted, the CHE is initiating a review of the HEQF. It is important to emphasise that the purpose of the review is not to fundamentally revise the HEQF. The continued relevance of the structure of the HEQF in broad terms is not in dispute. However, it is clear that given the inconsistencies highlighted above, it may be necessary to consider the development of new qualification types to facilitate access, ensure responsiveness to emerging skills and knowledge needs and enhance the coherence of the higher education system.

The process for the review process is as follows:

- The higher education sector, professional bodies, stakeholders and other interested parties are invited to make written submissions to the CHE on proposed changes to the HEQF.
- The deadline for the written submissions is 10 December 2010. The submissions should be sent to [ceo@che.ac.za](mailto:ceo@che.ac.za)
- The submissions will be considered and the CHE's response to the submissions, including proposals for effecting changes to the HEQF will be released for consultative purposes at the end of February 2011.
- The consultative process, which will be concluded by the end of May 2011, will include interaction with the higher education sector, professional bodies, stakeholders and other interested parties.
- The outcomes of the consultative process in the form of proposals for effecting changes to the HEQF, if these are necessary, will be recommended to the Minister of Higher Education and Training who is

responsible for determining the HEQF and for gazetting any changes in terms of section 8 (2) (e) of the NQF Act.

### **3. Implementation Plan for the Alignment of Existing Qualifications and Programmes with the HEQF**

The HEQF provides the framework for establishing a single qualifications framework for a single national co-ordinated higher education sector and for integrating these qualifications with the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). The current offerings in higher education in South Africa were developed in accordance with a range of separate policies, all of which have been replaced by the HEQF. These include the following:

- A Qualifications Structure for Universities in South Africa – NATED Report 116 .
- General Policy for Technikon Instructional Programmes – NATED Report 150.
- Formal Technikon Instructional Programmes in the RSA – NATED Report 151.
- Qualifications Framework for Schooling in Norms and Standards for Educators.

Thus the HEQF, which provides not only a new qualifications ladder, but also specifies the parameters and criteria for programme design, has implications for all existing qualifications and programmes in higher education. The main implication is that for many qualifications and programmes the alignment process will involve more than a simple technical change but will involve re-curriculation, to ensure that the qualification and programme meets the requirements of the HEQF.

The alignment of existing qualifications and programmes, if it is to conform to the requirements of the full accreditation process, involves three steps:

- (i) Alignment with the HEQF in terms of NQF level, credit-ratings, minimum admission requirements and naming, including, designators and qualifiers. In regard to the latter, it should be noted that the 2008 Classification of Education Subject Matter (CESM) categories have, in terms of Joint Communiqué 3, been used as a proxy for the naming of qualifications until such time as new naming conventions have been developed by the CHE.
- (ii) Ensuring that the programmes meet minimum qualification standards. In this regard, as indicated above, the standards setting framework is in the early stages of conceptualisation. The framework and process for developing standards will be finalised for implementation in early in 2011 and it is anticipated that it will take at least three years for the process to be completed. In the interim, the alignment process will take into account existing standards where developed.

- (iii) Ensuring that the programmes meet the HEQC's minimum criteria for programme accreditation, i.e. the full candidacy phase accreditation process.

### **3.1 Scope of the Project**

The scale of the alignment process is enormous - estimates of the number of programmes that exist in higher education and which will need to be aligned with the HEQF range from 8000 to 20 000. Of these, some 1000 have been accredited since 2005 and have been captured on the *heqc-online* system, with only the most recent i.e. those submitted after 1 January 2009, being HEQF-aligned. The date by which all higher education programmes will have to be aligned with the HEQF has yet to be announced by the Minister of Higher Education and Training. However, the alignment implementation plan is based on the assumption that the alignment process will take at least four years to complete. Thus, for the foreseeable future, the situation will be in flux, with institutions offering a mix of programmes with different statuses; new HEQF-aligned ones, existing ones that are alignable but not yet aligned, programmes that need considerable curriculum development to become alignable with the HEQF, and programmes that will need to be taught out and/or replaced by the date yet to be announced by the Minister. In this period therefore, public institutions will be operating with two Programme and Qualification Mix (PQM) sets; as programmes are aligned or replaced, so they will become part of the new PQM, while the old PQM will need to be taken into account for funding and reporting purposes.

Given the scale and complexity involved, and to ensure that the alignment process is successfully effected and with a minimum of disruption, the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) proposes to manage the process as follows:

- The alignment process will cover all programmes offered by public and private providers that have not undergone a candidacy phase accreditation process since 1 January 2009 and those which are not yet fully aligned.
- Only the first step and, where possible, the second step, of a full accreditation process will be undertaken to align existing programmes with the HEQF. This means that the alignment process will concentrate on ensuring that existing programmes are aligned with the HEQF (step 1), that they meet qualification standards where these have been developed (step 2), but that they do NOT undergo a full candidacy phase accreditation process in which programmes are individually evaluated to ensure that they meet all the HEQC minimum standards for programme accreditation (step 3).
- Given the flux in the system, implementation should proceed as soon as possible, but in a phased manner, starting first with those programmes and institutions least likely to be affected by such

changes. In this regard existing programmes be categorised and dealt with as follows:

- A: Programmes that need no or only a minor adjustment to align with the HEQF
- B: Programmes that require some curriculum development (amounting to a less than 50% change) to align with the HEQF.
- C: Programmes that cannot be aligned with the HEQF and which will need to be phased out or replaced.

The initial categorisation will be done by the institutions themselves based on a set of guidelines to be provided by the HEQC, which is outlined in 3.3.2 below.

## **3.2 Principles**

A number of principles that relate to the delineation of scope above underlie this implementation plan:

- HEQF-alignment involves both technical adjustments and extensive curriculum development and the plan should discriminate between programmes that require different types of alignment.
- All existing programmes should undergo some level of external scrutiny though not to the same extent as candidacy-phase programmes.
- Institutions should be afforded the opportunity to look at all their programme offerings at one time and in relation to each other to promote consistency, even though a phased approach is adopted.
- Information should be collected electronically such that a national programme database is developed.
- Information requirements for individual programmes should be minimal, and there should be no duplication with existing information in the *heqc-online* system or between relevant stakeholders. Each piece of information should only need to be entered once.
- Evaluation methodology and accreditation decisions should be tailored to different categories of programmes i.e. the A, B, and C categories noted above.
- Implementation should be phased, taking fluidity and complexity into account, but all institutions should feel that they have made some progress in the first phase.

## **3.3 Implementation Phases**

### **3.3.1 Preparatory Phase: August 2010 – January 2011**

In the preparatory phase, the focus is on two areas of activity. First, the consultations on the implementation plan that have taken place to date, including a workshop that was held with quality assurance managers of a

range of different types of higher education institutions, discussions at the operational level with the DHET and SAQA, and with a variety of other stakeholders in higher education institutions will continue to fine-tune the implementation plan. A workshop for institutional programme planners and/or quality assurance managers is planned for January 2011 to finalise the implementation plan.

Second, the extension of the *heqc-online* system to allow for the capture of programme information from institutions and the development of a national database is currently underway. An on-line form ensuring that all information required by the DHET and SAQA, as well as the HEQC, is included, is in the process of being developed. The database needs to be built, pre-populated with existing data where possible, and piloted with information from willing institutions offering different types of qualifications and programmes. A manual on how to use the system will also be developed.

### **3.3.2 Phase One: January 2011 – September 2011**

With the database built and tested, all higher education institutions will be requested to enter a minimal amount of information on each of their programmes onto the system. Institutions will be provided with an offline version of the information required to allow them to prepare their submissions in January 2011, and will be required to enter this information on the system in a six-month period, starting from 1 April to the end of September 2011. They will be asked to categorise their programmes into the A, B, or C categories as indicated above. Category A programmes are those requiring a minimal change e.g. a Bachelor's degree that is now on a new NQF level, or a National Diploma that becomes a Diploma with all else left unchanged. The majority of offerings are likely to fall into this category. Category B programmes are those that require some curriculum development, but which will result in a less than 50% change to the programme, e.g. an Honours degree that did not have a research component now requiring 30 credits of research. Category C programmes are those that can no longer be offered. Little more information than the name of the programme will be captured, such that if a replacement programme is submitted for candidacy phase accreditation, it can be linked to the programme it replaced. Institutions will be provided with a template to collect their information, the manual on how to use the system and will be offered assistance where necessary.

In this phase, the total offerings of each institution will be looked at in sub-committee meetings of the Accreditation Committee to determine that institutions have categorised their programmes correctly and have indicated the correct changes. All Category A programmes will then be recommended to the HEQC to deem them accredited. Institutions will be asked for further information on Category B programmes to be submitted in Phase 2 for group evaluation (see below). Institutions will be free to apply on the *heqc-online* system at any time for candidacy phase accreditation for any new or replacements for Category C programmes and these will be processed and evaluated individually as in the current candidacy phase process.



By the end of Phase One, each institution should have had a large portion of its offerings HEQF-aligned and deemed accredited, and will be working on those programmes that require some level of curriculum development to become aligned (Category B) and be in a position to develop new or replacement programmes for their Category C programmes when they are ready to do so. At the same time, from a national perspective, there will be a database of all programmes offered with a basic level of information on each.

### **3.3.3 Phase Two: October 2011 – December 2014**

Given that Category B programmes will require some curriculum development but are not entirely new programmes, they will be subject to greater evaluation than Category A programmes. To allow institutions time to undertake such development, it is in this phase that a staggered approach will be necessary. The division of institutions below is based on the types and range of programmes offered and is thus a purely technical one. At the end of Phase One, institutions will be asked to gather further information on their Category B programmes so that an evaluation of the programmes' alignment with the HEQF can take place.

**a. A group of universities** (blue group) that offer a limited range of programmes and which are likely to have the least proportion of Category B programmes, will be asked to submit their Category B programme alignment applications from January 2012 to July 2012. The Category B programmes of these institutions will be evaluated in broad fields of study by a group of evaluators. All Humanities programmes that require some change of these universities, will, for example, be evaluated by a small group of appropriate evaluators, as will their Category B programmes in the Sciences and other fields. The outcome of these evaluations will be recommended via the Accreditation Committee to the HEQC to deem the programmes accredited as accredited.

**b. A group of universities** (purple group) will be asked to submit their Category B applications from July 2012 to December 2012 and these will be processed as above.

**c. The private institutions** will be asked to submit their Category B applications from January 2013 to July 2013 and these will be processed as above.

**d. The comprehensive institutions** (red and orange groups) will be asked to submit their Category B applications from July 2013 to December 2013 and these will be processed as above.

**e. The universities of technology** will be asked to submit their Category B applications from January 2014 to July 2014 and these will be processed as above.

By the end of this Phase, all institutions should have all their Category A and B programmes aligned, and have made applications for new or replacement

programmes for their Category C programmes for candidacy phase accreditation.

### **3.4 Intended Outcomes**

The plan as broadly outlined above has as its main aim to achieve full HEQF-alignment of all existing higher education programmes by the end of 2014. However, it intends to achieve alignment in a majority of programmes by the end of 2011, while affording institutions time to undertake curriculum development in the areas where necessary. It also takes account of flux in the system, recognising that potential changes to the HEQF are most likely to affect the Universities of Technology, thus allowing time for development to take place with respect to their Category B programmes before requiring alignment.

A second intended outcome of the plan is a national database of higher education programmes that can be used by the relevant stakeholders; i.e. the DHET, SAQA, professional bodies and the institutions themselves.

A third intended outcome is a report on an overview of trends in programme development in higher education.

A fourth intended outcome is the potential to contribute to the development of standards in Phase Two. It is envisaged that groups of programmes in particular fields from similar types of institution will be evaluated in clusters; that process will articulate well with the standards-setting process, although in some instances it may precede and thus contribute to the standards being set, and in others it may be a case of implementing those already set. Efforts will be made to have a cross-section of peers involved in both processes, i.e. HEQF implementation phase 2, and standards-setting, to maximise the potential for synergy across them.

A fifth intended outcome is a contribution to the provision of evidence for the granting of self-accreditation status. While the process for self-accreditation status is still under development, it is envisaged that it will bring together the outcomes of a range of processes in the validation of an institution's own determination that it is ready for self-accreditation. Among the processes referred to are the first round of institutional audits, candidacy phase accreditation processes, re-accreditation processes (where applicable), national reviews and the first phase of HEQF implementation. On the basis of a successful record in these processes, institutions may elect to undergo a short process of evaluation of a select few programmes in order to be granted self-accreditation status. This should be possible from the end of the first cycle of quality assurance.

# HEQC ALIGNMENT: IMPLEMENTATION AND OPERATIONAL PLAN

