COUNCIL ON HIGHER EDUCATION

Title: Higher Education Practice Standard for

Institutional Identity and Agency

Long Form: Higher Education Practice Standard for *Institutional Identity and Agency, Leadership, Management and Governance*

1. Preamble for the HEPS on *Institutional Identity and Agency*

The QAF foregrounds differentiation as a critical principle for establishing an external quality assurance (EQA) framework that recognises, observes and celebrates diversity in higher education provision in South Africa. To express this principle, the HEPS on Institutional Identity and Agency (which also focuses on leadership, management and governance) aligns with and adopts the reflexive generative approach called for by the QAF.

The HEPS on Institutional Identity and Agency is grounded in a growing body of research on the role, function and importance of HEIs both within the higher education landscape and in society, recognising and acknowledging the significant contribution of HEIs to social cohesion and the public good. This higher education practice standard allows each institution to describe its identity, reflecting on how its location influences its identity and positioning.

Institutional identity and agency are inseparable from the national transformation agenda. Thus, HEIs must position themselves not only as academic entities but also as agents of social justice, redress and social and epistemic transformation. Transformation must inform institutional culture, governance and pedagogical practices, ensuring inclusivity and equitable participation across all dimensions of higher education.

The institutional situatedness should be understood broadly to include, among others, geographical, historical, ideological, social, pedagogical[1], strategic and commercial positioning. This HEPS is predicated on the understanding that an HEI's identity impacts its agency in effecting development and transformation, specifically in higher education and, through it, in society. Institutional positioning, in this context, invites HEIs to consider and describe their response (internal arrangements) to educational and sectoral challenges and needs within society and the HE landscape. Institutions, thus, have the space and scope to describe their differentiated context within the set guidelines and parameters while maintaining a focus on the knowledge project of higher education.

While responsive adjustments to and advancement of institutional identity are expected, the HEPS on Institutional Identity and Agency emphasises that in whichever way an institution positions itself, its identity must cohere and be consonant with the evolving purposes of higher education. Thus, in respect of this HEPS, the purpose of higher education, with specific emphasis on the knowledge project, is considered a key point of reference for framing institutional identity. This HEPS invites institutions to assess their current positioning relative to the purposes of higher education in South Africa, Africa and globally, and with due consideration of the impact of these on quality assurance norms and practices.

The HEPS on Institutional Identity and Agency assumes a link between institutional identity and quality. Institutions should, therefore, critically reflect on how internal quality assurance (IQA) and governance structures, including the policy framework of the institution, are informed by and shape institutional identity and embedded in the determination of the institutional qualification profile, curricula, institutional programmes, activities, and processes within the institution. As this HEPS frames institutional identity within the context of quality assurance and other Higher Education Practice Standards, engaging in critical reflection is not meant to legitimise or perpetuate unfavourable policies or practices. Instead, it offers a chance for careful evaluation against each practice standard.

The HEPS further recognises that organisational drivers are specific to each institution, framing and reframing its understanding and interpretation of the internal and external environment in which it operates and offers quality higher education. It also recognises that an institution's culture(s) will surface through the quality assurance practices and systems adopted by an HEI. These practices say something significant about institutional identity. Consequently, while not a primary focus, this HEPS invites institutions to reflect on the presence of enduring cultures (i.e., practices, traditions, values, and structures). Such reflection may include, for example, how the institution is experienced by various stakeholders (e.g., students, staff, regulators, external stakeholders, and society). Such experiences could serve as a helpful gauge of

[1]Pedagogy refers to a broad range of approaches to teaching and learning, which includes andragogy (the study of adult learning) and heutagogy (self-directed learning). Institutions may be required to explain their approach to teaching and learning in the context of one or more of these approaches. For example, an institution might describe its teaching and learning approach as heutagogically aligned, meaning that it emphasises self-directed learning.

enduring cultures that require attention because they may be at odds with the development and transformation agenda set for higher education in South Africa.

The HEPS on Institutional Identity and Agency further invites HEIs to reflexively consider the complex interplay between the various ecosystems (institutional, stakeholder and ideological systems) that coalesce around and inform institutional identity. In this regard, institutions should consider the external regulatory environment, institutional management, governance structures and protocols that set parameters for identity, the broader academic community, its disciplinary codes, and the broader world-of-work context. Thus, the descriptions offered by institutions—considered against the backdrop of the institution's conceptualisation of its identity—should take cognisance of the diversity of ecosystems within an institutional setting and how each contributes towards institutional identity and its influence in shaping quality practices. It is also an invitation for institutions to reflect on the continuities and discontinuities within their environment and how these are identified, dealt with, and resolved in the complex relationship characterising stakeholder engagements.

Institutions should also ensure that their conceptualisation of transformation explicitly aligns with the CHE's HEPS on Programme Processes, Learning Environments, and Transitions into, through, and from Higher Education, thereby situating transformation as both a structural and pedagogical imperative across all practice standards.

In summary, this HEPS affords an institution the opportunity to make its positioning and situatedness explicit, reflecting on how it reveals identity and agency choices and informs institutional vision, goals, strategy, policy frameworks, and decisions around quality assurance. In this sense, the HEPS on Institutional Identity and Agency is about what an institution wants to be known for and what it is good at, in other words, the value proposition which leads to its competitive advantage, which makes up its identity. The enactment of this identity by all role players in the institution through leadership, management and the agency of all who participate in the institution's life through learning, teaching, research, professional and support work or academic and institutional citizenship.

Responding to this HEPS, therefore, offers an institution a moment in which it should declare its identity, explain how it uses its agency within the contested space of higher education, and makes considered and thoughtful claims about how it understands its role and function in providing quality higher education.

2. Rationale for the HEPS on *Institutional Identity and Agency*

The HEPS on Institutional Identity and Agency is critical to ensure that higher education institutions provide high-quality programmes and services to students. The QAF offers a comprehensive approach to quality assurance, probing engagements on matters related to institutional identity, institutional agency, and the various aspects of leadership, management, and governance to ensure an institution of higher education will operate effectively and efficiently.

Identity and agency define the institutional tone and culture and should set the standard for the institution's strategy, policy, practices, and activities. This HEPS sets the foundation for all other standards. In responding to the other higher education practice standards, institutions should reflect on what they have described in their responses to the HEPS on Institutional Identity and Agency.

Institutional identity is an essential aspect of quality assurance. It clarifies an HEI's purpose and what it values and provides an understanding of, and insight into, how it positions itself within the local, regional, and global context as it responds to the evolving demands of higher education and the role of HE in society.

Institutional agency refers to the capacity of an institution to define and enact its own quality goals and to effectively, efficiently and coherently implement relevant strategies, framed within the context of provision in South Africa and against the backdrop of the higher education practice standards of the QAF. A strong sense of institutional agency is critical for effective leadership, management, and governance, allowing institutions to take ownership of decisions for quality that serves the institution's and its stakeholders' interests.

The HEPS on Institutional Identity and Agency supports the QAF's commitment to ensuring a differentiated approach to QA by affording institutions the opportunity to describe their identity and the complex expression of institutional agency within a shared space inhabited by multiple voices, institutions, professional bodies, and regulatory frameworks.

Within the context of a shared and differentiated space, the HEPS recognises leadership, management, and governance, including especially the institutional policy framework as the foundation of its internal quality assurance arrangements, as critical components of quality assurance within the QAF. Effective leadership should ensure that the institution has a clear sense of direction and purpose. In concert, effective and efficient management should ensure that the institution has the resources and processes in place to achieve its goals. Good governance should ensure the institution is accountable to its stakeholders, operates transparently, and is responsive to its constituents' needs.

The HEPS on Institutional Identity and Agency contributes to the QAF's objective (2021: 63) "To develop and implement an agile, future-oriented QA system that is responsive to the national planning and policy context, as well as a changing and differentiated HE sector and varying aspects of workplace requirements.

This HEPS should be read in conjunction with all other HEPS, particularly those on Programme Processes, Learning Environments, Student Transitions, Research and Innovation, and Engaged Institutions, as institutional identity and agency provide the foundation for coherence, transformation, and quality across the higher education system.

3. The HEPS Statement for *Institutional Identity and Agency*

The HEPS Statement is an overall statement that describes the requirements for institutional identity, agency, leadership, management and governance to ensure acceptable levels of higher education provision, experiences, and operations for students, staff, and the public. The Statement(s) explicitly describe(s) the codes of practice and agreed-on norms that describe threshold levels or minimum expectations for practice in these areas. The statement(s) describe requirements in the area of practice to ensure acceptable levels of higher education provision, experiences and operations for the students, staff and the public.

The institution should critically and reflexively interrogate its institutional identity in terms of its underlying philosophy (meta-framework), mission, vision, purpose (*raison d'etre*), strategy, leadership, management and governance structures (including its internal quality management system and policy framework). This self-reflection/introspection should be done within the context of the evolving national and international higher education landscape and the relevant local, regional, and global imperatives and commitments.

4. Guidelines for the HEPS on *Institutional Identity and Agency*

Guidelines indicate how HEPS might be interpreted and implemented. They guide good practice in the relevant area for consideration by the actors involved and provide the basis for differentiation between institutions, e.g. differentiation in terms of size, niche area, and National Qualifications Framework (NQF) level. The Guidelines are, therefore, open-ended and allow for innovation.

The Guidelines are posed as questions that enable institutions to engage with them in generative, reflexive, and contextually responsive ways to constantly improve practice in the area. They are also used evaluatively in internal and external quality assurance processes, such as accreditation and quality reviews, to form the basis for the Criteria that will be developed for future external quality assurance (EQA) functions, as described in the QAF (CHE, 2021).

This HEPS is divided into three dimensions. The guiding questions set for each dimension in this HEPS are primarily for the institution as a whole and with the institution as a unit of analysis. The way in which these dimensions are, however, enacted through institutional agency may be at various levels of the institution. For example, leadership, management and governance arrangements are relevant at the institutional, faculty, departmental and programme level. The guiding questions serve the purpose of enabling a deeper and reflexive unpacking of each dimension. Institutions should note that the guiding questions do not represent an exhaustive list, nor is it expected that each question be addressed. Instead, the various

stakeholders in an institution are encouraged to use these reflexive questions as a springboard into deeper reflection on institutional quality practice. The guiding questions and interconnectedness between various dimensions should be carefully attended to in order to enable reflexive engagements with the quality aspects of the dimensions.

4.1. Identity

This dimension focuses on internal institutional systems (such as the vision, mission, strategy and policy framework of an institution), as well as on the institution's external engagements with its stakeholders, as well as its ideological positioning, as it relates to developing and maintaining the identity of the institution.

Aspects for consideration	**Guiding questions[2]**
Institutional system - Internal	1. How does the institution define its unique institutional identity, considering its vision, mission, philosophy, strategic direction, policy frameworks, and pedagogical principles? 2. What are the factors, both historical and current, that enable or constrain the institutional identity of the institution? How were/are these identified? 3. How has the institution's identity evolved? What are the source documents that evidence that evolution? What does the narrative of the institution's identity convey about its values, priorities, and the factors that shape its changing identity? 4. What are the enduring or constant elements of the institution's purpose and identity, and how are these elements preserved and communicated? 5. To what extent are the elements of the national transformation agenda integrated into the institution's vision, mission, and strategy? What approaches or methods are being employed to achieve this integration? And how effective are these methods? 6. How do the institutional and academic governance structures, such as the Council or Board, and Seante or Academic Board[3], contribute to and promote the institution's identity and agency?

[2] The guiding questions are numbered solely for ease of reference and not significance or importance.
[3] The overall responsibility of public universities lies with their Councils, whereas the Senate of a public university is its highest academic decision-making body. Concurrently, the overall responsibility of private higher education institutions (PHEIs) lies with their Board, whereas the Academic Board of a PHEI is its highest academic decision-making body.

	7. How do the institutional and academic governance structures ensure alignment with the approved institutional identity? 8. How does the institution manage the complexities that arise from multiple stakeholders with different interests and investments in a particular institutional identity? 9. How do leadership and management promote the integration of the institutional identity in the institution's policy framework and its pursuit of the three higher education functions (learning and teaching, research, and community engagement)? 10. How is the institutional identity and agency reflected in the institutional planning and policy frameworks (strategic, operational, resource, and performance planning) and the institutional qualification and programme profile[4]?
Stakeholder system - External communities, industry and other role-players	1. Which mechanisms does the institution use to involve its internal and external stakeholders in shaping and informing its institutional identity? To what extent do these stakeholders support the identity, both conceptually and practically? 2. How frequently does the institution engage in reflective practices to assess and align its policy environment, approaches to learning and teaching, assessment, community engagement, and research with its institutional identity? Who participates in this process? 3. Which mechanisms does the institution use to gather information, monitor, and evaluate the level of support from its internal and external stakeholders, particularly regarding its institutional identity and strategic direction? How does the institution respond to this feedback? To what extent does the institution incorporate reflexivity into the monitoring and evaluation of these mechanisms? 4. How does the institution position itself in relation to current regulatory and policy frameworks, and to what extent does its identity and strategic direction align with these frameworks? How does the institution remain responsive to developments within these frameworks while maintaining its core identity and purpose?

[4] The institutional qualification and programme profile is also called the programme qualification mix (PQM) in public universities, and in PHEIs is equivalent to the list of accredited qualifications and programmes on the DHET Register that the PHEI may offer.

Ideological system	1. How does the institution's curriculum demonstrate its alignment with and commitment to local, regional, and global priorities such as sustainability, accessibility, transformation, STEM education, multilingualism, curriculum transformation? 2. How does the institution position itself in response to current higher education, political, developmental, socioeconomic, and transformation ideologies and agendas? How does this positioning reflect the institution's core identity and purpose? How does the institution accommodate the diverse perspectives and experiences of its stakeholder community in a responsive and evidence-based manner?

4.2 Agency

This dimension focuses on internal institutional systems, as well as on the institution's external engagements with its stakeholders, as well as its ideological positioning, as it relates to the enactment of the identity of the institution, in other words on institutional agency.

Aspects for consideration	**Guiding questions**
Institutional system - Internal	1. How is institutional agency / development / transformation embedded within the institution's vision, mission (purpose), strategy, and quality assurance practices, and how is this reflected in the institution's day-to-day operations? 2. Is the institutional agenda evident in its financial planning, resource allocation, and policies such as programme development, promotion, student support, and sustainable infrastructure development? Furthermore, how does the institution ensure that its resource allocation and policy decisions align with its core identity? 3. To what extent is there institution-wide agreement and support for the institution's choices and approaches towards agency, and how does the institution foster a culture of shared ownership and participation in pursuing its core identity? 4. How does the institution monitor and promote its institutional agency, and how does it empower its internal stakeholders

	to contribute to and participate in its decision-making processes? 5. How does the institution enact its identity in its decisions and actions, and how does it ensure that its agency reflects its purpose, values, and commitments?
Stakeholder system - External communities, industry and other role-players	1. How do the institution's external communities, industry and other role-players support its choices and decisions regarding agency and its commitment to development and transformation? 2. To what extent and how does the institution monitor and evaluate the impact and effectiveness of its approaches towards agency, change, and development and the benefits of these for its stakeholders? 3. What are the regulatory, industry and network-related challenges experienced by the institution which impact the attainment of institutional agency?
Ideological system	1. How does the institution respond to the South African HE policy imperatives of transformation? 2. In what ways does the institution's agency shape its impact on society and contribute to global transformation efforts? 3. How has the institution's agency and commitment towards transformation impacted society? What plans or goals has the institution set for itself to advance its transformational agenda? 4. How has the institution's agency and commitment towards higher education development impacted the higher education landscape, and how does it envisage its future role? 5. How has the institution's agency and commitment towards revisiting ideological perspectives contributed to broader societal discourse and understanding?

4.3 Leadership, Management and Governance

This dimension focuses on how leadership, management and governance practices in the institution affect the aspects on internal institutional systems, external stakeholder engagements and ideological positioning.

Aspects for consideration	**Guiding questions**

Institutional system - Internal	1. What are the governance structures of the institution? In which ways and how frequently is the effectiveness of these structures measured? 2. How do the various governance structures such as Council, Board, Senate, Academic Board and others contribute to and promote institutional identity, and how do these structures monitor the integration of the agreed-on institutional identity? 3. How do the leadership and management monitor, oversee, and contribute to strengthening governance, governance structures, and internal quality management system (including the policy framework) within the institution? 4. How does the institution characterise the relationship between leadership and governance structures, and to what degree is this relationship serving the academic project of the institution? 5. How does the institution view policy, procedures and their role in the governance of the institution? How often does the institution review its policies, and what factors are considered when determining the appropriate frequency of policy reviews? 6. To what extent do the institution's planning frameworks (strategic, operational, and performance planning) reflect the institutional identity, purpose, and strategic direction? 7. To what extent can the planning processes be considered collegial and inclusive (reflexively consider, motivate and provide evidence)? 8. To what extent do the planning and management of resources complement the institution's agreed-on institutional identity? 9. To what extent is the internal quality management system robust, mature, and functional? To what extent can it be considered complete, integrated, adequately embedded, and undergirded by appropriate structures, procedures and policies/SOPs?

Stakeholder system - External communities, industry and other role-players	1. How have internal and external institutional stakeholders shaped your institutional identity? 2. What mechanisms does the institution have in place to ensure that stakeholders participate, have a voice, and are included in the reflexive practice of the institution? What is the role and relationship of external stakeholders in playing an active role in the institution's framing and activation of governance? 3. How do the academic units reflect, lead, and embed the agreed-on institutional identity in the scholarship of learning and teaching?
Ideological system	1. What is the institution's overall management philosophy/framework? To what extent would you consider it effective, and what improvements/advancements to management frameworks could be made? 2. How would the institution describe its leadership philosophy/approach? To what extent is this approach effective, and what improvements/advancements to leadership approaches are required? 3. How does the institution publish and embed its academic policies in everyday practice? What is the relationship between policy and practice in the academic project? 4. What is the structure of the leadership and to what degree do the leadership entities or individuals foster the integration of quality within the institution? Moreover, how does the institution monitor the effectiveness of its leadership? 5. Who are the constituencies/representatives constituting the institutional leadership system (formal and informal)? 6. To what extent does the management initiate, foster, and support change and development within the institution? Additionally, how responsive is the management to modifying its approach and orientation towards governing and managing the institution? 7. To what extent is the leadership qualified, competent and experienced? What are the gaps? What measures are used to determine competence, experience, and qualification? What do these measures suggest about what is important and valued for leadership in the institution?

	8. How does leadership enable and advance institutional learning, and can specific examples be provided? To what extent does the leadership philosophy/framework/approach allow for a meaningful positioning of the institution's academic project both within the institution and outside? 9. Is institutional identity and agency considered as a key performance area (KPA), goal, or performance objective of the leadership team? Additionally, how does the institution monitor progress in this area? 10. How does leadership enable and advance institutional learning? How does management initiate, enable, promote and support change and development within the institution? 11. How does management foster, monitor and ensure a culture of quality, generally and specifically regarding academic quality in the institution? 12. How is quality assurance managed and integrated into the institution, monitored and evaluated for purpose and efficacy, and what is done when shortcomings are identified? What does this approach communicate about what is valued as quality? 13. Is quality assurance considered as an institutional key performance area (KPA)? In case quality norms are not met or disregarded, how does the institution implement performance and consequence management? Furthermore, what does the adopted approach to managing performance by the institution communicate about its values and priorities?

5. Criteria

Criteria are the instruments to determine whether the standard is being met or not. They are benchmarks for evaluation and for making quality judgements about higher education activities, based on the standards and guidelines agreed upon by the HE sector. The Criteria depend closely on the purpose of the quality judgement that it is meant to be used for.

Criteria are not included in the standard description. This is because the criteria will be developed to be relevant to the specific quality assurance exercise that is being conducted. This could be an internal quality assurance exercise conducted by an institution, or a specific

external quality assurance activity to be conducted by the CHE. Criteria are therefore activity-, time-, and context-specific. Some criteria, for example the criteria for accreditation, will be in place for a longer period.

Whenever an EQA activity is to be undertaken, the CHE will re-convene the Community of Practice to develop the relevant criteria for the exercise.

6. Review of the HEPS

It is understood that the HEPS will be regularly reviewed and revised in an iterative way to account for change. The HEPS on Institutional Identity and Agency will be in place for the first iteration of the QAF, for 7 years.

7. Sources Cited

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