Quality Enhancement Project

The Process

Institutional Audits Directorate

November 2013

1. Overview of the process

This document provides detailed information on some of the processes that will be followed in the Quality Enhancement Project (QEP). It is assumed that the reader has already read the *Framework for Institutional Quality Enhancement in the Second Period of Quality Assurance* (CHE 2013).

The aim of the Quality Enhancement Project (QEP) is to improve student success both at individual Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and in the higher education sector as a whole. For the purposes of the QEP, student success is defined as:

> Enhanced student learning with a view to increasing the number of graduates with attributes that are personally, professionally and socially valuable.

The goals of the QEP are:

1. Improving the quality of undergraduate educational provision;

2. Improving the number of quality graduates;

3. Developing a higher education system that is improving continuously as members of the higher education community collaborate to share good practices and solve shared problems.

Given the urgency of addressing the problem of poor student success, it is important for information and resources for improving student success to be developed at both institutional and national level, and to be shared widely. The QEP will therefore involve both institutionally-based and centrally coordinated activities, with information flowing in and out between institutions and the centre throughout the QEP (Figure 1).
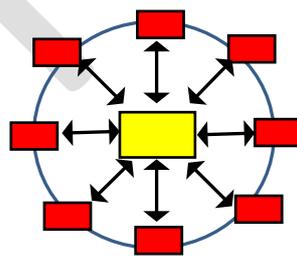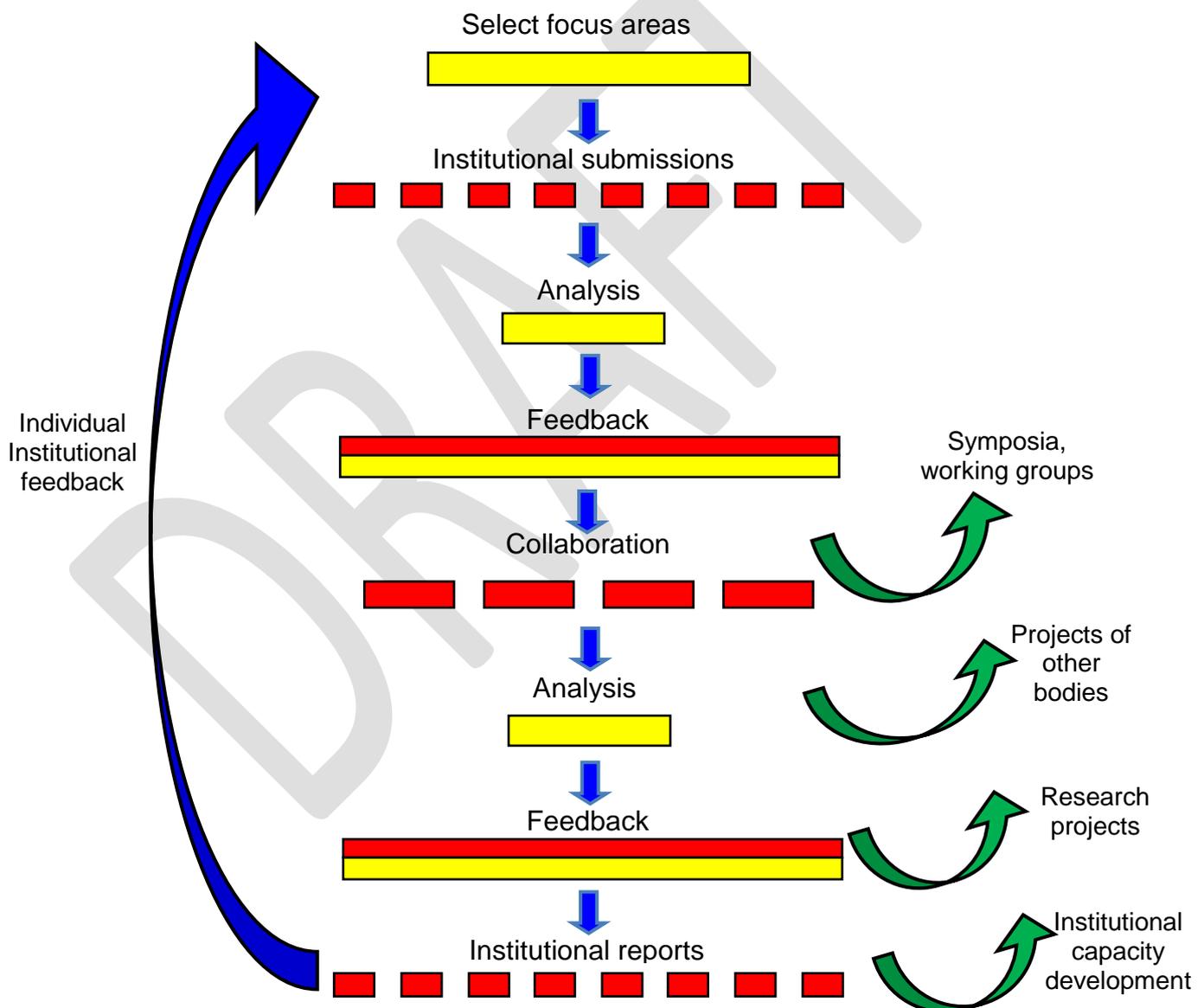

Figure 1: Information flow between institutions, shown in red, and the centre (national level), shown in yellow.

The QEP will have two phases. At the beginning of each phase, several focus areas will be selected that affect student success. All institutions will be asked to engage with the focus areas, both individually and collectively, in order to identify good practices that can be shared, adopted and adapted in different institutional contexts, as well as to develop solutions to problems that hinder student success. Some solutions will require extended or on-going collaborations among all or some institutions; others may require changes to policy.

Knowledge that is created during each phase of the QEP will be synthesised and made available to the whole higher education sector. Towards the end of one phase, focus areas for the next phase will be identified. Figure 2 shows the components of the process that will be followed in each phase of the QEP. The spin-off activities may take place at any point in the process.

Key
Block size indicates size of role players, e.g. small blocks are individual institutions.
Yellow: activities done centrally
Red: activities done by institutions
Green: spin-off activities, which may take place at different points in a phase and may be undertaken by different role players

Select focus areas

Institutional submissions

Analysis

Feedback

Individual Institutional feedback

Symposia, working groups

Collaboration

Projects of other bodies

Analysis

Feedback

Research projects

Institutional reports

Institutional capacity development

Figure 2: Diagram showing the components of the process for each phase of the QEP

1.1 Activities carried out by institutions per phase

In each of the two phases of the QEP, individual institutions will be engaged in a number of ways. Each institution will be requested to have a structure to oversee institutional activities related to the QEP. Institutions may choose to use an existing committee, but, given the holistic nature of the QEP, they may prefer to set up a cross-functional student success or quality enhancement (QE) team, committee or working group, which should include student representatives. In the interests of continuity, an institution may wish to select post-graduate students who did their undergraduate studies at the institution as their student representatives.

A phase will last for about two and half years. The timeline below shows the approximate timing for each activity. There will be overlap between the two phases because institutions will work on their institutional submissions for the second phase during the period in which they will be receiving individual feedback (first half of year 3).

1. Institutional submissions

Institutions will be asked to submit short documents (see section 3.2) in which they indicate how they are presently engaging with each of the selected focus areas. These documents will provide baseline information on institutions' priorities and practices at the beginning of the phase.

2. Collaborative groups

Analysis of the institutional submissions by the CHE will lead to the identification of groups of institutions that can usefully interact with each other around the selected focus areas. The CHE will facilitate collaborative group meetings in order to engage with the focus areas in greater depth by sharing good practices and addressing common problems. Each institution will participate in one such group. The group meetings are likely to take two to three days per group.

3. Institutional reports

Institutions will be asked to submit reports in which they indicate what they have done and plan to do in order to make progress in the selected focus areas. The reports should indicate what evidence they are using to determine the extent to which they are making headway.

4. Institutional feedback

An institutional profile will be compiled for each institution based on a number of documents, including the institutional submission and institutional report. Other documents may be included in the profile, such as audit reports and progress reports from the first cycle of institutional audits. These profiles will be used as the basis for discussions with individual institutions aimed at identifying strengths and areas for improvement, particularly with reference to the focus areas and how the

institutions are operationalizing quality enhancement.

A similar pattern of activities will take place in Phase 2. Institutions will submit institutional submissions on the new focus areas early in the second semester of Year 3, collaborative group discussions will take place in the first semester of Year 4, institutional reports will be submitted in the second semester of Year 4, and institutions will receive feedback in the first semester of Year 5.

1.2 Activities carried out centrally per phase

The involvement of Deputy Vice-Chancellors Academic and Teaching and Learning is vital to the success of the QEP. They will be the points of contact between institutions and the CHE. Therefore meetings will be held at least once a year with these DVCs from all public higher education institutions. In addition, each institution will nominate two Quality Enhancement (QE) forum representatives, who should be members of their institutional QE structure. It is envisaged that two meetings of QE representatives will be held per year, one of which may be regional, in order to share problems and progress at the coal-face related to the selected focus areas. There will also be student representatives at the QE forum meetings.

Other centralised activities will include the following:

1. Analysis of institutional submissions

The CHE will analyse the institutional submissions in order to identify promising practices related to the selected focus areas, as well as problems that may be common to all or several institutions. A summary of the analysis will be made available to the higher education sector.

2. Analysis of collaborative group discussions

Reports from the facilitated groups meetings will be analysed in order to provide more detailed information about promising practices as well as ideas for how to solve specific problems or overcome obstacles to student success. A summary of the analysis will be made available to the higher education sector.

3. Identification of new focus areas for Phase 2

On the basis of the information gathered in Phase 1, new focus areas for Phase 2 will be identified and communicated to HEIs.

4. Summary of findings from Phase 1

Information obtained from Phase 1 on promising practices that promote student success, approaches to overcoming problems and suggestions for further actions related to the initial focus areas will be synthesised and made available to the higher education sector.

A similar pattern of activities will take place in Phase 2. In Year 5 documentation will be produced centrally that summarises and synthesises what has been learnt about improving student success at higher education institutions in South Africa during the QEP. A decision will be taken about whether to continue with the QEP, begin a new cycle of audits of individual institutions, or engage in a new process.

1.3 Collaboration, spin-off activities and development opportunities

It is likely that there will be a number of spin-off activities during the QEP, set up as the need arises. For example, working groups may be established to address specific challenges or problems, such as how to develop accurate mechanisms for placing students with diverse levels of preparation into appropriate courses and programmes, or to develop shared resources, such as hiring and promotion policies that explicitly take into account teaching-related activity and proficiency. Joint research projects may be undertaken that help provide theoretical underpinnings and empirical evidence for what affects student success in the South African context and particular institutional contexts.

Collaborative projects may be established with various organisations, institutions or bodies. The CHE already collaborates with HELTASA on the National Excellence in Teaching and Learning Awards. It is likely that new opportunities for collaboration will emerge during the QEP.

Symposia and workshops may be organised at appropriate points in the QEP, in order to increase knowledge and skills in particular areas related to student success, such as professional development or institutional research. Conferences at which participants can share their knowledge and experiences may also be organised.

The collaborative, interactive and iterative processes that form part of the QEP will provide opportunities for institutional capacity development in a number of areas. These include data-gathering and processing, evidence-based decision-making, integrated planning for student success and reflective practice. In addition, it is hoped that quality enhancement and continuous improvement will become a mind-set for institutions and for the sector as a whole.

1.4 Details of the process

At this stage, focus areas for Phase 1 of the QEP have been selected. These are spelt out in section 2. Information about the content and nature of the institutional submissions is given in section 3. Details about what information will be requested from institutions later on in the QEP will be provided in good time, informed by what emerges from analysis of submissions and reports.

2. Focus areas for Phase 1

Higher education institutions have their own strategic objectives, with associated priorities, plans and activities. The QEP is not meant to displace these institutional functions. However, in the interests of making progress as a higher education sector in improving student success, each public higher education institution will be asked to engage with the CHE and other institutions on selected focus areas.

Of the many factors that affect student success, four areas have been selected that will form the focus of Phase 1 of the QEP. Other focus areas will be identified later in the QEP. While the selected focus areas are inter-related, it is possible for four largely different groups of people to engage in depth with the four areas simultaneously. The initial focus areas are listed below.

2.1 Focus area 1: Enhancing university teachers

Including professional development, reward and recognition, workload, conditions of service and performance appraisal.

In any education system, the quality of the teachers profoundly affects the quality of student learning. In addition to disciplinary expertise, university teachers need skills in pedagogy, curriculum development and assessment, as well as a number of other skills and attributes. In many universities, there are limited opportunities and incentives for university teachers to acquire such skills. On the contrary, university reward and promotion criteria often act as disincentives for academics to put time and energy into developing teaching skills, since research output is often the main criterion. Workload models may underestimate the time required to undertake quality teaching, and conditions of service, including serial, short-term contract appointments, may hinder young academics from acquiring teaching skills. Performance appraisals may not require evidence of good teaching.

2.2 Focus area 2: Enhancing student support and development

Including career and curriculum advising, life and academic skills development, counselling, student performance monitoring and referral.

The days when universities could admit students on a sink or swim basis are long gone. Along with the massification of higher education has come the expectation that universities will support students in a number of ways. In South Africa, many students need material support in the form of financial aid, accommodation, food and health care. These needs are a consequence of the socio-economic status of many students. While the need for such support should not be minimised, for the first phase of the QEP the intention is to focus on aspects of student support and development that are directly related to academic performance, including academic and career advising, life and academic skills and literacies, counselling and performance monitoring linked to referral systems.

2.3 Focus area 3: Enhancing the learning environment

Including teaching and learning spaces, ICT infrastructure and access, technology-enabled tools and resources, library facilities.

As with student support, the learning environment is affected by a combination of general socio-economic factors, such as students' living conditions, and university-specific factors. In this focus area, the intention is to focus on university-specific factors directly related to teaching and learning. These include spaces for teaching and spaces for students to learn, both individually and collaboratively, ICT infrastructure and access, technology-enabled tools and resources, and library facilities.

2.4 Focus area 4: Enhancing course[1] and programme enrolment management

Including admissions, selection, placement, readmission refusal, pass rates in gateway courses, throughput rates, management information systems.

Student success is greatly influenced by how students are selected into universities, which programmes they are placed in, whether or not formal support is available and compulsory and when and why registered students are not re-admitted. Addressing these issues is part of achieving a match between the characteristics of students and what universities offer. At the level of individual courses, in every university there are certain courses that may act as gateways or barriers to progression, including, typically, some of the large first-year courses. Monitoring student performance in such high-impact courses and intervening when necessary is important in promoting student success. And, of course, throughput rates are important indicators of student success. Effective enrolment management is only possible if appropriate management information systems are in place.

3. Institutional submissions for Phase 1

3.1 Purpose and nature of institutional submissions

Institutional submissions form the starting point for each phase of the QEP. They are intended to be for information rather than for evaluative purposes, although it is expected that institutions will recognise the value and importance of serious engagement in producing the submissions. Institutional submissions serve a purpose for both the institutions and the CHE. For institutions, the submissions provide an opportunity to reflect at an institutional level on what they are currently doing, or planning to do, and where there are unaddressed needs related to the focus areas. For the CHE, the institutional submissions enable the CHE to elicit information related to student success from all universities. This information is needed for two reasons:

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[1] Also called modules at some universities

1. It serves as a baseline, providing a snapshot of current thinking, practices and priorities in each institution related to the focus areas in particular, and student success in general.

2. It provides a starting point for identifying common approaches and problems, as well as unique approaches that are particularly effective and problems that are of particular concern to sub-sectors of the university community. This will allow more focussed discussions to take place later on in the QEP.

The institutional submissions should be concise and focused. If more detailed information is needed, the CHE will ask universities to provide it. Submissions should include an indication of where further information can be accessed from the university's website, if applicable.

Institutions are requested to be frank and clear in their responses. Otherwise it will be difficult for the higher education sector to engage meaningfully with enablers of, and obstacles to, student success. While there are indisputable differences in institutional contexts, most challenges are common to several, if not many, institutions. Clear and honest statements of the challenges will facilitate the development of strategies to address them. On the other hand, successful approaches developed in one institutional context may be able to be adapted to help students in another context.

3.2 Structure of the institutional submission

The sections that should form part of the institutional submission are listed below, together with the recommended page length. Up to a total of five pages of appendices may be included if further elaboration is needed on particular points. Please refer to Section 2 for a description of each focus area.

1. **Introduction (2-5 pages)**

1.1 Briefly describe the features of your institutional context that are most salient to the success of your students.

1.2 Indicate how the submission was prepared, included the names and designation of the people involved with producing various sections of the submission.

2. **Focus area 1: Enhancing university teachers (3-6 pages)**

2.1 Which aspects of your institution's Strategic Plan relate to this focus area? Please be specific by quoting from the Strategic Plan.

2.2 What activities do you currently have in place related to this focus area that are successful? What evidence do you use to conclude that they are successful? (Do not provide detailed evidence, just a description of the type of evidence you collect and a short summary of the results.)

2.3 What activities related to this focus area have you initiated during the past three or four years that have not been as successful as you had hoped? In what ways were they unsuccessful? What do you think might be the reasons for the lack of success?

2.4 What activities have you recently implemented or are you planning to implement in the next 12 to 18 months related to this focus area? Why have you chosen these particular activities? What is the need or problem they are intended to address?

2.5 What are the challenges or problems related to this focus area that still need to be addressed in your institution?

3. **Focus area 2: Enhancing student support and development (3-6 pages)**

3.1 Which aspects of your institution's Strategic Plan relate to this focus area?

3.2 What activities do you currently have in place related to this focus area that are successful? What evidence do you use to conclude that they are successful? (Do not provide detailed evidence, just a description of the type of evidence you collect.)

3.3 What activities related to this focus area have you initiated during the past three or four years that have not been as successful as you had hoped? In what ways were they unsuccessful? What do you think might be the reasons for the lack of success?

3.4 What activities have you recently implemented or are you planning to implement in the next 12 to 18 months related to this focus area? Why have you chosen these particular activities? What is the need or problem they are intended to address?

3.5 What are the challenges or problems related to this focus area that still need to be addressed in your institution?

4. **Focus area 3: Enhancing the learning environment (3-6 pages)**

4.1 Which aspects of your institution's Strategic Plan relate to this focus area?

4.2 What activities or facilities do you currently have in place related to this focus area that are successful? What evidence do you use to conclude that they are successful? (Do not provide detailed evidence, just a description of the type of evidence you collect.)

4.3 What activities or facilities related to this focus area have you undertaken or put in place during the past three or four years that have not been as successful as you had hoped? In what ways were they unsuccessful? What do you think might be the reasons for the lack of success?

4.4 What activities or facilities have you recently implemented or acquired or are you planning to implement or acquire in the next 12 to 18 months related to this focus area? Why have you chosen these particular activities or facilities? What is the need or problem they are intended to address?

4.5 What are the challenges or problems related to this focus area that still need to be addressed in your institution?

5. Focus area 4: Enhancing course and programme enrolment management (3-6 pages)

5.1 Which aspects of your institution's Strategic Plan relate to this focus area?

5.2 What activities do you currently have in place related to this focus area that are successful? What evidence do you use to conclude that they are successful? (Do not provide detailed evidence, just a description of the type of evidence you collect.)

5.3 What activities related to this focus area have you initiated during the past three or four years that have not been as successful as you had hoped? In what ways were they unsuccessful? What do you think might be the reasons for the lack of success?

5.4 What activities have you recently implemented or are you planning to implement in the next 12 to 18 months related to this focus area? Why have you chosen these particular activities? What is the need or problem they are intended to address?

5.5 What are the challenges or problems related to this focus area that still need to be addressed in your institution?

6. Other areas that affect student success (2-5 pages)
Areas that do not fall within the four focus areas.

6.1 Briefly describe other activities your institution is undertaking to promote student success (beyond the four focus areas).

6.2 What other challenges or problems does your institution face in promoting student success?