INTRODUCTION

This paper analyses the way external policy shapes programme design in higher education institutions. It also provides guidelines for meaningful and effective programme design in higher education institutions that have been affected by restructuring processes promulgated by national policy. These guidelines seek to replace traditional notions of academic standards and the integrity of learning programmes informed by poorly paced and sequenced ‘information/knowledge bundles’ presented through an ‘absolute truth’ teaching paradigm that leaves limited space for inserting teaching and learning strategies and ‘public good’ (Singh, 2001) in the design of qualification and learning programmes.

Traditionally, the notion of standards and integrity in teaching and learning has often been confused with the notion of academic standards being confined to polarised domains of knowledge hierarchies strictly defined in terms of discipline boundaries. Academic standards have thus been associated with the production and transmission of knowledge, in many cases extremely specialised, that is closely guarded by agents and scholars in these disciplines (Smeby, 1998) and expressed in the form of routinised syllabuses or standard curricula that change, in a hierarchical fashion, only with the production of new knowledge systems. Despite variations in knowledge types and the degree of specialisation, and a distinction between the natural and the social sciences (Smeby, 1998), highly positivist academic standards have often resulted in general programme design practice that lacks appropriate academic planning and the insertion of public good in teaching and learning arrangements.

Operating under the positivist paradigm of academic standards, subject experts have often designed programmes and presented curricula in the form of absolute truth ‘information/knowledge bundles’ isolated from the social imperatives of teaching and learning, student support and the general public good of higher education. This polarised notion of academic standards has been perpetuated through transmission teaching and ‘regurgitation’ assessment instruments used to separate the high from the low achievers, leading to students being classified as ‘gifted’ or ‘slow’ depending on their pace and ability to assimilate subject content that is in itself a benchmark of academic standards in its complexity, depth and level of difficulty. The central premise in this paradigm has often been a neat separation of the ‘autonomy of science’ from the ‘politics of regulation’ (Kanamori, 1999) and the public good (Singh, 2001) of teaching and learning.

1 Nhlanhla Cele was formerly Quality Assurance Manager at the University of South Africa (UNISA). He is at present Head of Training and Acting Director of the Quality Promotion and Capacity Development Directorate of the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) of the Council on Higher Education (CHE).
This separation of the ‘scientific order’ from the ‘administrative order’, the ‘moral order’ and the ‘normative order’ in the business of teaching and learning and research and community engagement has seen the ‘scientific order’ reigning supreme in higher education institutions, thus consigning the other orders to the periphery of what academic standards are all about. This practice has often led to academic standards being construed in academia as equivalent to high failure rates (especially in the natural sciences and economic studies). Where failure rates are used as determinants of academic standards, then if most students in a particular module or programme fail, that module or programme is deemed to be of a high standard. This simplistic equation not only means that certain higher education programmes fail to serve the social contract and public mandate in terms of fitness for purpose, value for money and transformation (in relation to the expectation that higher education will mediate the phase of knowledge production with the phase of knowledge distribution – Kanamori, 1999), but also demonstrates the inadequacy of the positivist notion of academic standards.

COMPLIANCE AND DISTINCTIVENESS

In South Africa, the regulatory frameworks seeking to advance the notion of public good in higher education teaching and learning have put in place a dichotomous definition of ‘academic standards’ that predicates disciplinary scholarship (what Kanamori describes as the self-understanding of science) as being parallel to teaching and learning efficiency (based on the moral value and political regulation imperatives). This shift, informed by the assertion by van Buuren and Edelenbos (2004) that knowledge has become increasingly de-monopolised, democratised and contextualised as public property that is no longer the sole province of the academic elite, has widened the gulf between scientific knowledge and policy premised on the social contract of higher education institutions. Mutually agreed-upon criteria for assessing academic standards have taken the central stage in South African higher education where the boundaries between the autonomy of science and the public good of higher education are neither completely intact nor completely dissolved. Policy has set a benchmark of minimum standards for the public good of higher education while simultaneously appropriating adequate space for distinctive disciplinary standards, the autonomy of scientific knowledge and the multidimensional role of universities in the broader social order. However, from an academic freedom perspective, minimum standards as benchmarks can only shift the parameters of academic standards to a compliance mode (later defined as a minimum threshold of tolerance in this paper), while it is apparent that universities have an extrinsic role to play in knowledge production – that of enhancing intellectual development, personal autonomy and meaningful citizenship (Young, 2003). From what is often referred to by institutional autonomists as the interventionist perspective, higher education institutions bear the burden of complying with the intrinsic value of higher education, while having the latitude to internally extend the threshold of academic standards and integrity to the high-end performance level (Carroll, 2004, see Figure 1) – a level that determines the distinctiveness of learning programmes in comparison with similar programmes offered by other institutions. This appears to extend the notion of academic standards to embrace imperatives of efficiency and public good without disenfranchising the vanguarding of academic standards by subject experts that is entrenched in the domains of disciplinary knowledge systems. The next section of this paper explores these two types of academic standard (compliance and distinctiveness).
Despite Young’s assertion that the purpose and agenda of higher education institutions are bigger than the immediate imperatives of social development at any given stage of social reform, it would seem that the design of higher education learning programmes has to be aligned with regulatory frameworks – the mandate given to these institutions and assessed through set criteria and minimum standards. While the purpose of higher education remains broader than politically inclined social reform and production of graduates for the labour market, the current glaring discrepancy between the mandate of higher education institutions and the current quantitative measure of institutional performance in terms of throughput\(^2\) reinforces the elitist stance inherent in the traditional notion of university education. While it can be rightfully argued that the elitist paradigm engendered in the notion of university education is not necessarily an undesirable feature, there is a view articulated through policy that this should not be achieved at the expense of relevance, efficiency, contextualisation and the public good. In South Africa, where public university activities are largely funded by the state, universities cannot be left alone to champion practice that only advances a particular form of scientific curiosity and scholarship, however excellent, that answers only questions generated by universities (Tamir, 1985) and not questions raised by society and the consumers of skills and knowledge produced by these institutions. The interplay between autonomy and accountability has to be negotiated with full understanding of the parameters of accountability, responsibility, academic freedom and institutional autonomy – juxtaposed against a set of minimum standards laid down by state agencies. The interplay of academic standards and integrity between compliance and academic autonomy (autonomy of science) is illustrated in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: The interplay of academic standards and integrity**

![Diagram illustrating the interplay of academic standards and integrity.](#)

*Source: Carroll, 2004*

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\(^2\) The national Department of Education has redefined the funding formula to promote efficiency in higher education in terms of throughput and graduation rates.
As shown in Figure 1, various criteria can be adopted to determine the domain within which learning programmes fall. Critical guiding criteria that cannot be excluded from this equation are relevance, compliance, academic rigour, programme viability, fitness for purpose, value for money, benchmarked comparability and distinctiveness of programmes. Indicators and imperatives that can be used to measure the extent to which programmes comply with these criteria are provided in Table 1.

**Table 1: Indicators and imperatives**

<table>
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<th>Defining criteria</th>
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<td>Relevance</td>
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<td>Accreditation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Minimum standards</td>
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<td>Academic complexity and rigour</td>
<td>Supply driven</td>
<td>Academic excellence</td>
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<td>Constant reviews</td>
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<td>Best practice</td>
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<td>Content depth and complexity</td>
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<td>Value for money</td>
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<td>Maximum feedback</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Research driven</td>
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<td>Distinctiveness</td>
<td>International benchmarks</td>
<td>Academic freedom</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Innovation and uniqueness</td>
<td>Autonomy of science in knowledge disciplines</td>
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<td>Research base and cutting-edge scholarship</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Masterpiece frameworks</td>
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**Financial viability**

While there is a thin line between the ways that supply and demand shape academic standards, programmes that are mainly driven by financial viability and the entrepreneurial imperative tend to focus on large enrolments without foregrounding quality assurance. The admission of students into such programmes is entrepreneurial and driven by market demand, with limited attention given to balancing massive supply with teaching and learning quality imperatives. The way market demand dilutes teaching and learning support resources is often ignored – and in this instance ‘more often leads to worse’ Trow (1987). Academic standards and integrity are often compromised in the race to secure sufficient profit for the provider. Corporate financial planning using profit as the main lever for the viability of programmes replaces rigorous academic planning guided by quality assurance imperatives – relevance, compliance and academic worth are often ignored as the focus shifts to generating profit. Higher education becomes a commodity, teaching and learning becomes a commercial enterprise, and learning programmes become traded products whose utility and relevance is left to the customer
(in this case the student). This paradigm is informed by corporate financial models that are usually out of sync with the quality assurance imperatives of academic discourse.

**Compliance**

Carroll (2004) asserts that standards provide a reasonable idea of what the final picture of an organisation (and in this case the organisation of learning programmes) will look like if the institution complies with these standards. As Carroll further argues, standards help us identify breaches and deviation – and the more particular the standards the more particular the outcome of compliance. Legislative prescriptions and policy guidelines are used as the main guidelines for designing learning programmes so as to secure accreditation from regulatory agencies and professional bodies – a significant portion of the standards of disciplinary knowledge systems are contained in these guidelines. In South Africa these legislative guidelines are contained in the NQF framework, the New Academic Policy, the National Plan for Higher Education (DoE, 2001), the Higher Education Qualifications Framework (DoE, 2004), and the HEQC Criteria for Programme Accreditation (CHE, 2004a). These policy frameworks define the baseline uniform standard for all higher education institutions, while allowing space for contextual differentiation where subject experts are used as peers to pronounce on disciplinary standards for programme content. As levelling mechanisms, national policy guidelines ensure that the education students receive is much the same across the higher education sector (equivalence of provision) – within the limits of minimum standards.

Institutions operating in the compliance mode tend to be fixated on responding to external policy prescriptions by meeting minimum standards that lead to institutional validation and programme accreditation. While institutional validation and programme accreditation are vital defining imperatives of institutional existence, the academic standards entrenched in the notion of university education create the expectation of something more than just technical compliance. As maintained by Trow (1987), universities are expected to emphasise higher skills and more complex knowledge where students learn to question conventional wisdom and generate their own – perhaps by learning to think in original ways. Such high order skills cannot be attained through averaging of university education on technical compliance, but by ensuring that university education is shaped by the zest for attaining excellent scholarship beyond the minimum standards compliance threshold. The view has been expressed that there is a significant difference between the measurable assessment of learning programmes and predetermined standards (with technical architectural prescriptions and limited constructive effect regarding the high-end performance) and the creation of innovative ‘masterpiece’ learning programmes (Carroll, 2004).

**‘Academic complexity’ and standards**

This level of scholarship foregrounds benchmarking against best practice elsewhere in the world. Academic standards in learning programmes and qualifications are vigorously maintained by involving renowned peers and experts from outside universities in assessing curricula, teaching and learning practice, assessment tasks, assessment instruments, and the moderation of assessment practice. This practice ensures that the
learning programmes and curriculum content are pitched as close as possible to common standards at other universities within the limits of comparability (Trow, 1987) and sustains the value of these programmes in terms of academic standards. While comparing programmes globally upholds their integrity and secures more credibility for qualifications awarded on completion, the pursuit of such status should not blindly predicate the autonomy of science in a manner that falls short of the contextualisation of knowledge as public property.

**Distinctiveness and academic standards**

At this level of operation, differentiation and ‘masterpiece’ innovation are the main indicators at play in the pursuit of the mediated autonomy of scholarship. The recent restructuring of the South African higher education landscape that has left a particular category of universities relatively ‘untouched’ (the University of the Free State, the University of Pretoria, Rhodes University, the University of the Witwatersrand, the University of Cape Town and Stellenbosch University)\(^3\) bears testimony to the fact that distinctiveness in institutional typologies remains a significant criterion for the differentiation of universities and academic freedom (Menon & Cele, 2005). The general perception is that – despite their political history – these universities have over a period of time achieved a high level of scholarship that needs to be preserved as an icon of academic excellence, cutting-edge scholarship and a token of academic freedom in the broader higher education landscape. As Trow observes, universities that attract students of higher academic ability than others are generally perceived to be awarding more first class qualifications than others, making them a symbol of distinctive quality beyond the minimum quality standards provided in policy frameworks. Institutions that pride themselves on distinctiveness of scholarship provide learning programmes that are defined by high-end performance of innovative research opportunities and experiences and academic efficiency models which are comparable to the noble academic standards of the top-league universities in the world (however those are determined), and thus employ best practice for teaching and learning. In spite of all this praise for their level of scholarship, such institutions cannot be disengaged from compliance agencies and trusted to transform themselves in line with the national imperatives of the state and society in general. However, the expectation is that when engaged for compliance such institutions will provide evidence of having transcended the compliance mode without overlooking the environmental contextual imperative in which they operate – distinctiveness does not mean acquiring an ivory tower status or absolute autonomy of scientific scholarship.

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\(^3\) The University of the Free State incorporated the Bloemfontein campus of Vista University and the Qwa Qwa campus of the University of the North; the University of Pretoria incorporated the Mamelodi campus of Vista University; Rhodes University handed over its East London campus to the University of Fort Hare; and Stellenbosch University handed over its School of Dentistry to the University of the Western Cape.
WHY ACADEMIC STANDARDS AND INTEGRITY?

Academic standards and the integrity of learning programmes are defined by four critical imperatives and questions that shape the HEQC programme accreditation criteria (CHE, 2004a). These questions are:

1) Is there **fitness of purpose** in the contextual plugging of the learning programme into the mission and vision of the institution and its mandate? (HEQC Programme Accreditation Criteria 1 and 2 help programme designers answer this question.)

2) Is there **fitness for purpose** in the architectural design of the learning programme and teaching and learning arrangements inherent in the programme design? (HEQC Programme Accreditation Criteria 1, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15 and 16)

3) Is there **value for money** in the academic worth of programmes and quality arrangements and support mechanisms for programme coordination and delivery? (HEQC Programme Accreditation Criteria Criteria 3, 4, 7, 8, 11, and 18)

4) Does the programme take into consideration the **systemic transformation imperatives** of higher education so that the tracking components and mechanisms built around the programme will encourage constant feedback and review of the programme? HEQC Programme Accreditation Criteria 1, 2, 11, 17, 18, and 19

This plotting of accreditation criteria against the quality assurance principles that guide critical questions about programme design suggests that the answers to these questions cannot be viewed as isolated technical responses but rather as interlocked rigorous arguments that lend themselves to a coherent synergy in programme design. This notion of academic standards resonates well with Carroll’s notion of masterpiece learning programmes that go beyond using predetermined standards with technical architectural prescriptions.

Effective programme design in higher education institutions should start by posing the critical question ‘What shall we teach?’ – a simple question that is informed by the programme qualifications mix (PQM) which draws the parameters of the mandate given to an institution. This mandate should be informed by the institutional type and organisational form of each particular institution, for example a university of technology,

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4 Criterion 1 evaluates programme design; Criterion 2 evaluates student recruitment, admission and selection

5 Criterion 5 evaluates teaching and learning strategies; Criterion 6 evaluates student assessment policies and procedures; Criterion 8 evaluates programme administrative services; Criterion 9 evaluates postgraduate policies, regulations and procedures; Criterion 10 evaluates programme coordination; Criterion 12 evaluates teaching and learning interactions; Criteria 13 and 14 evaluate student assessment practices; Criterion 15 evaluates the coordination of work-based learning; Criterion 16 evaluates the delivery of postgraduate programmes.

6 Criterion 3 and 4 evaluate staffing provisions; Criterion 7 evaluates the infrastructure and library resources; Criterion 11 evaluates academic development for academic success; Criterion 18 evaluates the programme impact.

7 Criterion 17 evaluates student retention and throughput rates; Criterion 19 evaluates programme review.
comprehensive university, distance education university or traditional contact university. The teaching and learning modalities of the programme design are derived from the institution’s mandate and the purpose the institution has to serve through learning programmes, research and community engagement.

The question ‘What shall we teach?’ aligns the public mandate of a higher education institution with its vision and mission statements. Using guiding criteria and standards to design learning programmes necessitates posing the question ‘What will this particular learning programme look like?’ The compliance criteria and other regulatory policy guidelines provide a framework (an architectural mapping) of the programme. Complying with minimum standards will lead to programme accreditation where the programme will be deemed reasonably intact as depicted in the ‘Compliance’ picture in Figure 2. In this arrangement the purpose of the learning programme combines with the competencies and disciplinary interests that shape the programme’s academic standards. The difference between the ‘Compliance’ picture and the ‘Distinctiveness’ Mona Lisa masterpiece is defined by the measure of high-end performance and the level of scholarship that the institution aspires to attain.

**Figure 2: Martin Carroll’s ‘Mona Lisa’ paradigm as an illustration of the notion of academic standards**

![Diagram of architectural mapping, compliance, and distinctiveness]

*Source: Carroll, 2004*

**IMPERATIVES OF PROGRAMME DESIGN**

The view has been expressed that the design of a learning programme should be guided by a set of organising questions (Tamir, 1985; UDW, 2000; Young, 2003) derived from a combination of architectural standards (Carroll, 2004) and NQF specifications with
benchmarks and best practice guidelines in curriculum design. These guiding questions for programme design as derived from academic standards frameworks are:

- How does the programme define ‘graduateness’? The design of learning outcomes and exit level outcomes should be linked to what the institution perceives as the competence and quality of graduates who exit with a qualification from the programme. Graduate competence can be defined in terms of three levels of academic standards – architectural design, compliance and distinctiveness (see Figure 2).

- External constituencies – experts, professional bodies, alumni, employers, the market – have a stake in the programme and help shape academic standards. How will they be represented in the critical part of programme design?

- What are the minimum credits required at specific levels or maximum credits where these exceed specified minima? Architectural mapping policy guidelines are the basis of academic standards here.

- What generic or specific articulation arrangements are built into the programme? Benchmarks and subject content input from external sources define the programme’s scope, depth and rigour in comparison with similar programmes offered elsewhere.

- What are the programme’s critical learning outcomes and how are these integrated with the cross-field critical outcomes? Integrated assessment practice refereed by educationists and external subject experts shapes academic standards and protects the integrity of the learning programme.

- What are the entry requirements for the programme and how will students be recruited? Teaching and learning in the programme must be appropriate to the definition of student entry level quality and readiness.

- What teaching and learning strategy will provide the appropriate ultimate learning experiences for the programme? The mode of delivery, level of interaction and philosophical underpinning of teaching practice in the programme set the parameters for student support arrangements and academic interaction in relation to how the programme defines ‘graduateness’. Academic standards at this level are shaped by the quality of teaching in the programme. These strategies are often chosen on the basis of the value academic leaders attach to particular knowledge systems and the learning outcomes. If knowledge is perceived as ‘absolute truth’, then transmission teaching dominates; if knowledge is perceived as subject to critique and debunking, a critical discourse is foregrounded.

- What assessment strategies will be adopted to measure the attainment of set outcomes (integrated assessment)? The integrity of the assessment strategies, practice and tasks is protected through internal academic governance structures and quality arrangements. External moderators also pronounce on the standards of assessment vis-à-vis teaching strategies and subject content. The criteria for selecting external moderators and examiners and the expertise of these people shape the academic standards required for ‘graduateness’.
• What profile of academic/teaching staff will suit the programme and its inherent standards so as to promote academic rigour? The teachers’ specialist expertise (qualifications, and teaching and research experience) protects the integrity of the programme and determines its academic standards.

• What student support arrangements and mechanisms will be used to design learning experiences so as to realise the appropriate level of ‘graduateness’? This is often shaped by the way knowledge is perceived in particular disciplines, and the way this knowledge will be distributed, mediated or negotiated.

• What will the programme’s curriculum content be and how will it articulate with other programmes at the institution and at other institutions? External expert opinion and benchmarks foreground the academic complexity, depth and academic standards espoused in the programme. A sound understanding of disciplinary knowledge systems and hierarchies in particular knowledge domains, combined with the exit level outcomes, should be used to select the programme’s content.

• What research opportunities will the programme provide for teaching staff and students? Here scholarship which transcends the compliance mode is often used to shape academic standards.

• How will the programme be resourced in a viable manner? The ‘value for money’ principle helps determine the quality of teaching and learning resources, and academic standards are also defined in terms of the quality of these resources.

• What alternative learning opportunities does the programme provide outside the institution? The notion of shared and contextualised knowledge is essential in determining learning opportunities created outside the classroom.

• What other arrangements and mechanisms will be put in place to protect the integrity of the learning programme? These should promote institutional effectiveness and efficiency, the quality of provision in the programme and the distinctiveness of its learning experiences. The effectiveness of these arrangements should be constantly evaluated through impact studies, tracer studies, user surveys and peer and expert opinion.

• How will the programme’s academic worth, administrative coordination, employability of graduates, relevance for intellectual development and preparation of students to become meaningful citizens be evaluated and reviewed (Young, 2003)?

These questions show that the notion of academic standards transcends disciplinary specifications and knowledge boundaries. Programme design is a rigorous dialogue for negotiating interplay between architectural mappings, compliance and distinctiveness as depicted in Figure 2 above. While the NQF provides a framework for technical mapping, guidelines such as the HEQC Improving Teaching and Learning (ITL) Resources (CHE, 2004b) negotiate space for creating what Carroll calls ‘masterpiece learning opportunities’ based on best practice guidelines, and tempered by academic freedom.
RULES OF COMBINATION AS AN EXAMPLE OF ARCHITECTURAL MAPPING

If the integrity of the learning programme is to be upheld, various steps should be taken to ensure there is a link between its purpose and its objectives and the intensity of the learning experiences it provides. These steps include designing a coherent programme that is aligned with a particular NQF level; writing learning objectives that are commensurate with the NQF level at which the programme is pegged; developing learning objectives and outcomes pegged at the same NQF level as the programme; designing curricula with depth and breadth largely pegged at the same NQF level as the programme; sequencing the curricula according to the knowledge hierarchies of the disciplines that form the programme’s core curriculum; pacing the teaching and learning experiences according to the programme’s objectives; and designing assessment strategies, activities and instruments that are commensurate with the NQF level at which the programme is pegged. It is this interlocking of design with the teaching and learning experiences provided by the programme that upholds the programme’s academic standards and integrity – premised on fitness of purpose, fitness for purpose and value for money.

Young’s warning about using technical instruments to determine the purpose of programmes and define academic standards suggests that these instruments should be used with caution and reasonable flexibility. For instance, it is assumed in South Africa that the generic annual academic calendar consists of 30 weeks, and that on average a student, especially if full-time, spends 40 learning hours in a programme (Magabane, 2005). The breakdown of the appropriation of SAQA (South African Qualifications Authority) credits to programmes and modules should be informed by the exit level outcomes of learning programmes and the specific learning outcomes of modules, within the limits of common assumptions regarding the annual academic calendar. The integrity of the programme should be guided by a straightforward stipulation regulating all Level 5 to 8 qualifications. The formula for a 120 credit qualification is:

\[1 \text{ SAQA credit} \times 30 \text{ (weeks)} \times 40 \text{ (hours)} = 1200 \text{ (notional hours)}\]

From this formula, it is clear that a 120-credit programme or qualification cannot be completed in six months by a part-time student. In any case, where a part-time student can afford to complete a 120-credit programme, academic standards and the programme’s integrity will be compromised by all the notional hours needed to select the curriculum content, organise learning activities, pitch the curriculum at an appropriate level, and use appropriate assessment strategies and activities to assess student competence. While this formula provides a generic guiding principle, it is worth noting that there are instances where learning may be accelerated in response to RPL (recognition of prior learning) arrangements, the pace of learning for individual students, disciplinary knowledge and the nature of the teaching and learning discourse in higher education. Thus it follows that in some instances institutions may overrule credit values and de-link them from time allocations while maintaining high academic standards to realise the appropriate level of ‘graduateness’ and exit level outcomes. Such flexibility should be allowed in programme design, although it may violate SAQA principles of architectural design, because academic standards may sometimes take precedence over the technical requirements of programme design as shown in Figure 1.

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Tyler (1949) as cited by Tamir (1985) identifies four areas of focus in curriculum development which retrospectively characterise learning programme design in South African higher education. These are as follows:

a) the educational purpose of the learning programme,

b) the learning experiences provided and distributed for this purpose,

c) the organisation of these learning experiences, and

d) determining whether the purpose of the learning programme has been achieved.

It is apparent from this notion of curriculum design that academic standards and the imperatives of teaching and learning stretch beyond the mere design of learning programmes around the pedagogical objectives of the NQF (National Qualifications Framework) level.\(^8\) (It is worth noting that currently there is no agreement on NQF levels and that breadth of content coverage is often disguised as academic depth – in which case the notion of academic standards becomes more complex.) Students’ attainment of outcomes is closely dependent on the programme and the curriculum, and high failure rates sometimes have less to do with the high academic standard of the content than with poor teaching, and content deliberately made difficult. The notion of academic standards being defined in terms of confined and polarised content organised in uniform hierarchical theoretical structures (Smeby, 1998) and presented as a precluded prerogative of subject experts or isolated knowledge producers (Kanamori, 1999) seems to be gradually nudged to the periphery by social policy imperatives. Parallel with this traditional notion of academic standards are the notions of standards defined in terms of routinisation of best teaching and learning practice (Smeby, 1998), diversity and contextual knowledge (van Buuren & Edelenbos, 2004), multidisciplinarity (Skaerbaek, 2004), interdisciplinarity (Gilbert, 1998), mediated learning imperatives perceived by some professors as the result of loss of trust between the world of politics and the world of learning (Welle-Strand, 2000), the massification of education, the knowledge explosion, and so on.

It is not the intention of this paper to dismiss the value of scientific scholarship as the basis of academic standards, but rather to broaden the notion of academic standards to embrace contextual imperatives (critiquing and debunking of scientific knowledge, knowledge utility and the pragmatic role of university education, Welle-Strand, 2000), in a manner that predicates the ‘normative order’ (policy compliance), the ‘administrative order’ (efficiency), and the ‘moral order’ (public good) in the processes of producing and distributing these forms of knowledge systems. Such a deconstruction of the notion of academic standards is essential if we understand curriculum as a contextualised course of study aimed at enabling students to learn or master particular knowledge and practices (Slonimsky & Shalem, 2004).

\(^8\) The HEQF (Higher Education Qualifications Framework) presents a different opinion of qualification levels that seems to stand against the current NQF arrangements. The HEQF is not yet policy and the NQF has been used in this paper to advance the debate on the notion of academic standards.
CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that perceptions (although often used as an indicator) do not feature as defining factors of academic standards and integrity. It has shown that regulatory policy frameworks play a pivotal role in levelling the playing field to reduce glaring disparities of academic standards among institutions. It has suggested that not all institutions are destined to attain academic distinctiveness as the defining feature of academic standards and integrity. From the perspective of the academic standards threshold presented in this paper, one can conclude that the sphere of compliance is the foundational defining factor of academic standards and integrity in South African higher education. Accreditation of learning programmes as a levelling mechanism for standards definition is itself a robust process based on quality judgement by peers and discipline specialists. Complying with minimum accreditation standards is a significant measure of academic standards and integrity in programme design and teaching and learning. This process separates poor quality programmes from those that reasonably meet the minimum standards criteria. However, through reflective practice and benchmarking processes, higher education institutions must rally resources around teaching and learning so as to advance academic excellence beyond compliance.

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