Quality Assurance in South African Universities

Views from SAUVCA’s National Quality Assurance Forum
April 2002

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<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>ACA</td>
<td>Academic Co-operation Association (Europe)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AD</td>
<td>Academic Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>ADC</td>
<td>Academic Development Centre</td>
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<td>ARPL</td>
<td>Assessment and Recognition of Prior Learning</td>
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<td>CHE</td>
<td>Council on Higher Education</td>
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<td>CHEMS</td>
<td>Commonwealth Higher Education Management Services</td>
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<td>CQI</td>
<td>Continuous Quality Improvement</td>
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<tr>
<td>CTP</td>
<td>Committee of Technikon Principals</td>
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<tr>
<td>DoE</td>
<td>Department of Education (South Africa)</td>
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<tr>
<td>DVC</td>
<td>Deputy Vice-Chancellor</td>
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<tr>
<td>EQA</td>
<td>External Quality Agency</td>
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<td>ETQA</td>
<td>Education and Training Quality Assurer</td>
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<td>EUA</td>
<td>European Universities Association</td>
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<td>HAI</td>
<td>Historically Advantaged Institution</td>
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<td>HDI</td>
<td>Historically Disadvantaged Institution</td>
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<td>HEI</td>
<td>Higher Education Institution</td>
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<td>HEQC</td>
<td>Higher Education Quality Committee (South Africa)</td>
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<td>HR</td>
<td>Human Resources</td>
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<td>IMHE</td>
<td>Institutional Management in Higher Education (OECD)</td>
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<td>INQAAHE</td>
<td>International Network of QA Agencies in Higher Education</td>
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<td>ISO</td>
<td>International Standards Office</td>
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<td>NCHE</td>
<td>National Commission on Higher Education</td>
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<td>NRF</td>
<td>National Research Foundation</td>
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<td>NSB</td>
<td>National Standards Body</td>
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<td>NPHE</td>
<td>National Plan for Higher Education</td>
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<td>NQF</td>
<td>National Qualifications Framework</td>
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<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development</td>
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<td>QA</td>
<td>Quality Assurance</td>
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<td>QAA</td>
<td>Quality Assurance Agency (UK)</td>
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<td>QPU</td>
<td>Quality Promotion Unit</td>
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<td>SADC</td>
<td>Southern African Development Community</td>
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<td>SAQA</td>
<td>South African Qualifications Authority</td>
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<td>SAUVCA</td>
<td>South African Universities Vice-Chancellors Association</td>
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<td>SE</td>
<td>Self-Evaluation</td>
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<td>SETA</td>
<td>Sector Education and Training Authority</td>
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<td>SGB</td>
<td>Standards Generating Body</td>
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<td>SNQAF</td>
<td>SAUVCA National Quality Assurance Forum</td>
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<td>T&amp;L</td>
<td>Teaching and Learning</td>
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Acknowledgments

This report has no single author. It borrows freely from the writings and oral contributions of all the Forum members past and present. A list of persons whose material has contributed directly to this report is listed below. Their contributions are gratefully acknowledged. Specific reference to sources is only made in the text where direct quotations have been included. The editor’s task has been to collate and organise into a coherent whole, a diverse range of material so that it fairly reflects the quality assurance activities and collective wisdom of the Forum members and their universities. Inevitably, in stitching it all together and in attempting to provide a consistency of style and approach, the personal views of the editor have shaped the final document.

Michael Smout
March 2002

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SNQAF Mission Statement

SAUVCA’s premise is that the sector has a fundamental role in building a culture and practice of self-regulation and accountability. Complementing the work of the HEQC in pro-active and partnership-based processes is therefore vital. SAUVCA’s NQAF seeks to strengthen and help shape a quality assurance system within the relevant legislative frameworks at the formative and summative stages. In particular, the SNQAF will assist by promoting workshops, research, policy and implementation advice. This will entail a programme of implementation that touches the core of QA activity as identified and steered by QA practitioners.
Foreword

This publication serves as an important platform from which to develop a comprehensive knowledge base on quality assurance. Key topics which fall under the ambit of quality assurance (QA) are explored, giving the reader a thorough grasp of the nature of the task ahead, principally from a sectoral perspective, but sharpened by an awareness of the role of the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC).

The document signals the simultaneous but specific preparation that the HEQC and the sector need to undertake. Whilst the design of the auditing and accreditation functions and co-ordination with the Department of Education on key reporting requirements lies with the HEQC, the sector has to build a culture and practice of self-evaluation and scrutiny as pre-requisites for accountability.

Building appropriate systems and structures to enhance quality in terms of ‘fitness for purpose’ will take the South African higher education system a long way towards local and global recognition.

We wish to acknowledge the generous contributions of members of the SAUVCA National Quality Assurance Forum for their considered inputs and precious time which enabled the weaving of a complex set of arguments. This baton was carried by Michael Smout whose retirement as Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Rhodes University made the time commitment possible; we are most fortunate to have secured him as convenor of our quality assurance forum and as editor of this volume.

Carnegie Corporation funds have been vital in resourcing our national meetings and this publication for which we are very grateful.

Njabulo Ndebele
Chairperson, SAUVCA

Piyushi Kotecha
CEO, SAUVCA
Chapter 1
Introduction

We examine the role of SAUVCA and its National Quality Assurance Forum with respect to quality assurance. A brief history of quality assurance in South Africa is then provided as essential background material for persons unfamiliar with the South African higher education landscape. Finally the aims and structure of this report are described.

1. The Role of SAUVCA

As the collective voice of public universities, SAUVCA is an important national role-player in the transformation and reconstruction of higher education. Its raison d'etre is to provide constructive and critical perspectives on all key matters that concern higher education (HE) – even more so in this crucial transitional era. Its role is especially relevant as it occupies an enabling space between the development of national policy and the experience of its member universities who are responsible for implementing and steering change process at institutional level.

Given the scale and scope of the change agenda initiated by the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) processes in the mid 1990s, the commitment required from key parties to realise policy goals compelled SAUVCA to adopt a strategic plan in 1998 which embraced capacity development at national and institutional levels in critical areas such as quality assurance.

Communities of interest are common in higher education and the university system is fortunate in having a professional QA community which is committed to collegial but self-critical discourse aimed at making quality assurance work in the universities. The Executive Committee of SAUVCA recognised the value of this grouping and it was formalised within SAUVCA structures as the SAUVCA National Quality Assurance Forum (SNQAF).

Fundamental to the QA Forum is the recognition that if QA is to take root in our system, and if South Africa is to avoid some of the problems other systems have encountered, then the
institutions need to own and co-shape its structures and processes. The establishment of a statutory QA body in the form of the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) has by no means diminished the need for a pro-active period of preparation within HE; in fact it has accentuated and reconfirmed the role that SAUVCA could play in this regard. If the knowledge designers within HE do not embrace QA responsibilities fully on the basis of their delivery claims, they must surely be held accountable.

SAUVCA has several committees and projects which interact with government structures periodically on a number of issue ranging from funding, legislation and research to academic affairs, admissions, and leadership capacity development. It is in this context that the focus on quality became apparent as a vital political, educational and equity issue. In addition, the importance of QA has been highlighted here and elsewhere in the world as HE systems move from elite to mass provision and the associated new challenges in quality assurance.

Enhancing quality has to be a systematic, internalised and strategic priority for higher education managers at senior level. In fulfilling its obligations towards the goal of participative governance, SAUVCA’s Executive Committee has therefore directed its attention not only to the role of the SNQAF but also to a unit for Management Capacity Development.

2. The Role of the SNQAF

At a meeting of SAUVCA’s National Quality Assurance Forum on 8 May 2001, all but two of the 21 universities were present and approved the principles and purpose of the forum. It was agreed that the most urgent priority was an assessment of ‘what we know’. Discussions about quality and quality assurance among university representatives have been going on for years – in fact since the January 1995 decision of the universities to set up the Quality Promotion Unit (QPU) – and the sector has developed considerable expertise in the QA field. However this expertise has until now not been collected together and made available to institutions to assist in developing their quality assurance systems. Inevitably, with the all too frequent changes in QA personnel in the universities, new incumbents of QA positions find themselves going back to square one to make new beginnings. An assembly of current QA knowledge in a single volume should prove a valuable resource document for newcomers and old hands alike.

At the first meeting of the Forum it was also recognised that discussions should be held with the Higher Education Quality Committee of the Council for Higher Education (CHE) in order to ensure that the work of the SNQAF will complement and contribute to that of the HEQC. It was agreed that SAUVCA should develop a generic approach to QA in the universities that complies with the legislative requirements and promotes development goals in line with government policy and international best practice. SAUVCA’s premise is that the sector has a fundamental role to play in building a culture and practice of self-regulation and accountability. Complementing the work of the HEQC in proactive and partnership-based processes is therefore vital. The SNQAF seeks to strengthen and help shape a national QA system at the formative and summative stages. At the same time the SNQAF has a duty to assist its member universities in developing appropriate intra-
institutional QA structures and policies. To achieve these ends the Forum agreed to promote workshops, conduct research and provide advice on policy and implementation.

Quality assurance is recognised as a key mechanism in the transformation of South Africa’s HE system and in the restructuring of the HE landscape which aims at a differentiated range of institutions responsive to the country’s development needs. A well implemented QA system is also essential to the regulation of the private providers of HE and the integration of private provision with publicly funded facilities. One of the key questions is how measures of quality should be used to give effect to a policy of a differentiated, publicly funded, university sector in South Africa? This question reflects the fact that quality is at the heart of differentiation and differentiation is the cornerstone of government policy as set out in the White Paper: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education (1997) and the National Plan for Higher Education (2001). It could be argued, that to say universities should meet a spectrum of needs by being different to one another (rather than converging to a single type) is to say that universities should have different sets of qualities. Further, to require such differentiation to be steered and regulated via institutional audit, programme accreditation and public funding is to require that these sets of qualities should be measurable in some way.

If the above premises are accepted, then an important objective of the SNQAF should be the design of QA guidelines for the publicly-funded university sector that accommodate institutional differentiation. Such a framework would not substitute for the development of each institution’s internal QA system nor would it interfere with the HEQC’s statutory obligations. However by assisting in the design of policy guidelines that meet the requirements of the NPHE, the university sector would be influencing its own destiny while meeting the HEQC’s stated wish to work in partnership with stakeholders.

Intra-institutional QA is an international issue given the worldwide demands for greater accountability which followed increased participation ratios in HE, new economic demands and greater pressures on state coffers. Clearly, QA in South Africa can benefit from international experience and can learn from the mistakes of countries which introduced QA to universities decades before South Africa. However, our university sector has particular characteristics which must be taken into account in the design of appropriate, local QA systems. These characteristics include the legacy of segregation by race and language, widely unequal provision of resources and the continuing crisis in secondary education resulting in an under-supply of suitably qualified matriculants. They include the requirements of national reconstruction and development and the opportunity for new partnerships between institutions, collaboration between SADC countries and international partnerships.

In summary, it is vitally important that South African Higher Education Institutions (HEI’s) build QA systems appropriate to their own institutions and do not adopt an attitude of ‘one size fits all’. The SNQAF has a valuable role to play in the development of a national QA system in higher education, in assisting its members to build appropriate internal QA structures and policies and in the exchange of expertise and experiences across the universities in order to build capacity in QA.
3. A brief history

This brief outline of the development of quality assurance in the universities deals with issues which will be all too familiar to those few people who have been involved with QA management in South Africa throughout the last decade. For more recent incumbents of QA positions and those with an interest in the topic in general, this section is intended to provide essential contextual material.

South African universities have a long tradition of ‘trying to do things properly’, of being concerned that graduates should be of ‘high quality’. Indeed there is evidence of this that stretches back to the first university colleges that pre-date the formation of the Union of SA in 1910. By contrast however, modern QA, a process which formally assesses and manages quality, is a relatively new concept. The first debates in SAUVCA about actually assuring quality took place in the early 1990s and individual universities took up the QA challenge over the last decade. In some institutions, QA policy and structures are in the early stages of development while others have quite sophisticated QA systems and have undergone various forms of external quality review.

Traditional approaches to ensuring ‘quality’ in academic endeavours relied heavily on comment from peers which was applied mainly to the content of courses, in the external review of examination questions and answer papers, and in the use of external examiners for masters and doctoral theses. Several universities have long insisted that doctoral theses should be examined by at least one authority from a well-known foreign institution. The period of traditional approaches to QA can be said to have lasted from the establishment of the first university college in 1902 until the late 1980s. During this period wide variations in quality characterised the university sector and doubtless there were also wide variations in quality within institutions. The desire to achieve high quality existed but the concept of formal quality assurance was still to be introduced.

By 1990, there were 21 universities and 15 technikons serving a population of nearly 40 million people and quality ranged widely across them, reflecting their history and location. The long established universities – the historically advantaged – are well established with considerable assets. Such institutions have had ample time and resources to devote to quality issues in contrast to the universities which grew out of the Extension of University Education Act of 1959. These latter institutions – the historically disadvantaged – have had much less by way of time and resources to build up their academic reputations. In some cases the newer universities were well established in terms of buildings and equipment – the things that money could buy quickly – but found themselves in the position of having to do more with less. Anyone who wishes fully to understand the challenges faced by those responsible for developing QA systems in HE in South Africa needs also to understand the establishment and history of the institutions.

Today the publicly funded universities work with a student intake which ranges from those from privileged socio-economic backgrounds and first class schooling to those from impoverished backgrounds who are poorly prepared for higher education. The challenge for the universities and their QA systems is how to bring all of their students to acceptable levels by the time of graduation.

the concern with quality is not new
The National Commission on Higher Education

In February 1995, President Mandela published the terms of reference of a National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE). The first indications of this body’s thinking were available as a discussion document in April 1996 and the final report of the NCHE (1996) was published five months later. It is a seminal document and laid the foundations for a White Paper and later the Higher Education Act of December 1997. The journey from the Freedom Charter (of the ANC) to the HE Act was 42 years in the making but the driving philosophy remained fundamentally the same. The situation is admirably encapsulated in the frontispiece to the NCHE report which took the form of a letter to President Mandela:

“South Africa has the most developed and well-resourced system of education and training in Africa. Some of its higher education institutions, programmes and research compare with the best in the world. It is crucial for these strengths to be supported and preserved. Yet the legacy of apartheid has led to fragmentation of higher education, to discriminatory policies and practices, inequitable allocation of resources and undemocratic governance structures. The consequences are restricted participation of black people, an unplanned and uncoordinated system with no clearly articulated national goals, and an inability to respond meaningfully to the economic and social needs of the majority”. The letter further noted that “the proposed system is underpinned by the key principles of equality, democratisation, quality, academic freedom, effectiveness and efficiency”.

In the consequent debate about the transformation of the HE sector, an effective quality assurance system has come to be seen as a critical pre-requisite to successful transformation. The NCHE report interprets quality as “maintaining and applying academic and educational standards, both in the sense of minimum expectations and requirements that should be complied with, and in the sense of ideals of excellence that should be striven for” (1996: 72). Quality is equated with ‘fitness for purpose’ (some critics would add fitness of purpose) and the report further suggests that “international recognition is also an important normative notion in determining and assessing academic and educational standards”. The report proposed that a finding of poor quality “would be a source of concern and a reason for reform”. Finally, the NCHE recommended the establishment of a Higher Education Quality committee with the responsibility for undertaking institutional audits, accrediting programmes and promoting quality.

The Quality Promotion Unit

The first move by the universities to formalise quality assurance was the establishment in January 1995 of the Quality Promotion Unit (QPU) which was to “…assist universities to conduct productive institutional self-evaluation at different levels; and create a basis in the HE system for accreditation of programmes for the purpose of articulation”. Because of resource constraints, programme evaluation was planned as a later function of the QPU. The initial focus was on institutional audits based on self-evaluation and site visits by a panel of peers. The philosophy was one of self-regulation, of quality improvement rather than quality control, of evaluating institutions against their own mission statements rather than uniform standards, and of avoiding a direct link to state funding in the developmental stages. In short, the emphasis was on quality systems
rather than quality per se and fitness for purpose was the principal term of reference. The QPU planned to audit all 21 universities within its first three years and had undertaken two pilot audits and seven formal audits by the time the decision was taken to close the unit in December 1999.

Biennial conference
Another significant development in the evolution of QA in Higher Education in South Africa was the hosting of the biennial conference of the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) at the Kruger Park in May 1997. South African universities were just beginning to realise the importance of QA at that time and their representatives at the conference were exposed to debates taking place globally regarding QA. The conference gave QA a major boost in South Africa and served to refocus the efforts of QA practitioners across the country who were able to learn from the mistakes of others and establish international contacts. More recently the HEQC has become a member of INQAAHE.

The Higher Education Quality Committee
By December 1997, the Higher Education Act had assigned to the Council on Higher Education (CHE) the statutory responsibility for quality assurance and quality promotion in higher education to be carried out by a permanent body, the HEQC. The mandate of this sub-committee is to:

- promote QA in HE
- audit QA mechanisms of HEI's
- accredit programmes of higher education

An interim HEQC was established in April 1999 and the committee was formally set up in May 2001. A Founding Document for the HEQC was published in October 2000 by the interim committee. This document should be read in full by those who intend to practice QA in HE in South Africa. The main areas of responsibility of the HEQC were listed at that time as:

- accreditation and evaluation
- certification
- auditing and institutional review
- capacity development
- quality promotion
- QA coordination
- QA research
- international liaison
- information

note that we cover more recent activities of the HEQC in the final chapter.
The National Qualifications Framework

Central to the thinking which emerged from the education policy debates of the 1980s was the setting up of a single National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and in 1995 the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) Act became law. SAQA’s main function is to oversee the development and implementation of the NQF. In carrying out this task SAQA has the responsibility to set standards and assure quality, and both of these impact on the institutional QA practitioner. Implicit in SAQA’s mission is the notion that “the definition and understanding of quality is arrived at through broad participation, negotiation and synthesis” (Isaacs, 2000). This definition correlates closely with that of the NQF as a ‘social construct’ and the commonly accepted definition of quality as ‘fitness for purpose’ where the essential pre-requisite is a broad consensus concerning purpose. In short, the work of the Standards Generating Bodies (SGB’s) and National Standards Bodies (NSB’s) in setting standards and getting qualifications registered on the NQF is a reflection of the qualifications demanded by South African society and the learning outcomes that society believes should be associated with each qualification. The SAQA structure is as follows:

![SAQA Structure Diagram]

The Education and Training Quality Assurance bodies (ETQA’s) are accredited by SAQA to monitor and audit the provision, assessment and achievement of specified standards and/or qualifications. The HEQC is the registered ETQA for higher education but its relationship with other SAQA structures and professional boards remains to be clarified.

Much has been written about SAQA and the NQF in the past few years and a good deal of it has been highly critical because of the complexity of the systems and processes that have evolved and the confusing documentation that was available when the Qualifications Authority was in its formative stages. More recently the situation has been clarified to the point where the intentions of SAQA are more easily understood. There remains however a significant body of critics, supportive of the mission of SAQA but sceptical of its ability to put its plans into effect. Some 200 committees have been established to carry out the work of SAQA and these are very demanding in terms of money and the time of skilled people.

In 2001 the Ministers of Education and Labour commissioned an external review of the implementation of the NQF and SAQA, and the review report is awaited at the time of writing. The HE sector is hopeful of a simplified structure and process in the implementation of the NQF, and that potential overlap in the activities of the HEQC and SAQA will be resolved.
4. Aims and Structure

As noted in section 2 above, one of the first aims of the SNQAF was to collect, assess and collate ‘what we know’ about QA within the university sector. To this end, Forum members were requested to submit documents which would reflect their relevant experience and expertise. The material received came in the form of published papers, conference presentations, university policy documents and personal communications to the editor. The SNQAF also organised a workshop around a series of QA themes in November 2001, and this event helped to highlight the state of QA in SA universities. Areas of strength soon became clear as did areas in which much work remains to be done. These latter areas were carefully noted for further investigation, possibly as specific QA projects for SAUVCA to pursue. A number of SAUVCA documents such as the Contributions of the Forum towards the founding perspectives of the HEQC (SAUVCA, 2000) also proved most valuable. Reference has been made to key contributions to the QA debate from general literature on the topic.

In broad terms, the report is structured to focus on conceptual issues in the first five chapters, while Chapters 6-9 are more concerned with the implementation of QA within the universities. The first chapter deals with issues of context while the second and third examine the conceptual issues which surround quality and quality assurance, and the policy frameworks and structures necessary for the implementation and monitoring of QA. Chapter 4 describes areas in which QA can and should be implemented and suggests a priority order for these while Chapter 5 discusses benchmarking as a specific aspect of QA. Chapters 6 and 7 deal with the two areas in which much QA effort has been concentrated in the last few years; teaching and learning and evaluation. There is no doubt that QA in these high priority areas is well developed and that considerable expertise has been accumulated across the university sector. Chapter 8 introduces several topics which might best be described as works-in-progress. These are areas in which QA is generally not well developed and in which research and further discussion is required. The nature of the issues at stake, as currently understood, is examined. Chapter 8 deals with a topic which has only been touched on by the Forum – the Internationalisation of Quality Assurance. This is an issue of growing importance worldwide and it is known that several South African universities have either recently undergone some form of international review or plan to do so in the near future. The essential issues and the pros and cons of international quality review are discussed. The final chapter looks at what a university needs to do to prepare for an external review; in particular, ways in which an institution can set up its QA structures and systems in order for a visit by external reviewers to cause the minimum disruption to everyday activities.

Key points

1. This report aims to present in a single volume the collective expertise in quality assurance that has accumulated in the university sector in order to assist institutions in developing their quality assurance systems.

2. Effective quality assurance systems are recognised as an essential pre-requisite to the successful transformation of the higher education sector in South Africa.
Chapter 2
Quality and Quality Assurance

Given that a single, precise definition of quality is not possible, we consider concepts of quality and their relevance within a university context. The meaning of and need for quality assurance are then examined and the characteristics of high quality described. We briefly set out the extent to which quality, disadvantage and access are related and argue that the design of quality assurance systems must be sensitive to issues of disadvantage.

1. Defining quality

Providing a single, precise definition of quality that is appropriate to the university context is simply not possible. A statement about quality implies a relative measure in that quality may be high or low or unacceptable and the term has come to embrace a series of quite distinct concepts. These concepts have evolved to suit the different contexts in which statements of quality are made and a brief description of the more important ones follows.

Quality as excellence

This view sees quality as something very distinct in the sense that it is necessary to excel or exceed in order to achieve quality, and clearly, in order to exceed, there needs to be others who are exceeded. Excellence by definition is only attainable by a few. In the context of higher education, it may be viewed as inappropriate in that it can lead to exclusivity and elitism. This is not to say that an institution should not strive for excellence in its activities but the concept is inappropriate when applied to a university system as only a very small proportion can excel and in so doing achieve ‘quality’.

Quality as perfection

Quality can also be viewed in terms of consistency in that a given set of specifications is perfectly met. This conception of quality fits well with the output of industrial production lines; the ‘quest for zero defect’ being an appropriate mission for a well-known manufacturer of electronic goods. Here, the focus is not on excellence but on perfect conformance to specification – an admirable ideal for a manufacturer but not for a university.
Quality as value for money
Value for money is a market view of quality. The goods or services received are related to the investment. However it is possible to buy a poor quality item or service very cheaply so that it may be considered good value for money. Although value for money is an oft-quoted conception of quality, it is not really appropriate if one is ultimately seeking high quality or at least conformance with some minimum standards. As such it is a poor definition in the context of higher education.

The ISO approach to quality
The International Standards Office has designed a set of ‘standards’ which can be applied in a wide range of circumstances. The ISO defines quality as “a complete set of features and characteristics of a product or service important to meet the required demand or natural need”. Put more simply, to the ISO quality is the production of goods and services which meet the demand and standards agreed on. The first ISO standards were concerned mainly with production and technical processes and assessed the extent to which processes met a pre-determined set of idealised standards. More recently ISO measures have been applied to the provision of services and some educational institutions have adopted the ISO approach even if only in respect of certain of their activities. It may well be that in the running of a laboratory the ISO approach is of value but few people see it as an appropriate concept for assessing a university or its graduates.

Quality as customer satisfaction
Related to the ISO approach is the concept of quality as a measure of customer satisfaction. With respect to goods and services the ultimate judge of quality is the customer whose levels of satisfaction can be regularly evaluated and used for feedback and improvement. Within the university context, customer satisfaction surveys – usually applied to students and graduates – are increasingly being used. However, caution needs to be exercised in planning surveys and evaluating the results, and this topic is taken up in greater detail in Chapter 6.

Quality as fitness for purpose
This concept of quality is the most widely used in higher education today either singly or in combination with some of the other concepts. In the South African context, where differentiation of HEI’s is a stated goal of the National Plan, this concept of quality is particularly apposite. Quality as fitness for purpose is far removed from the idea of quality as something exceptional, distinctive and only attainable by a few. In this definition, if something ‘does the job’ it is designed for, it is a quality product or service. It has also been described as a democratic notion of quality. In the university context, each institution decides on its vision and mission and is then assessed accordingly.

Working with a fitness for purpose definition of quality does however raise the issue of fitness of purpose. If the vision and mission of an institution were generally seen as inappropriate by wider society, or if an institution set its sights very low, then fitness for purpose has little value. In short,
if the ‘purpose’ is appropriate, then fitness for purpose becomes a valuable concept of quality for universities. There is however the danger of complacency once fitness for purpose has been achieved. Even when a university is declared fit for purpose, continuous improvement aimed at excellence, if not perfection, should remain a goal in all academic endeavours.

Quality as transformation
In this sense quality is seen in terms of change from one state to another – the extent and depth of the transformation brought about in a student during the course of a university education. This notion of quality includes the student as an active participant in a process of ‘adding value’ to the initial input (the student). The student is thus transformed and empowered by the provision of a variety of learning experiences. In modern parlance, this is ‘education for human resource development’. The greater the value added or the development of the individual, the higher the quality.

2. Quality Assurance

A definition
Gone are the days when a university could rest content in the knowledge that it is a first class institution producing top-notch graduates. In the modern era quality must be shown to exist and the process of monitoring quality for continuous improvement is what quality assurance is all about. To ‘assure’ is ‘to make certain or ensure the happening of something’. If quality is defined as fitness for purpose, then quality assurance is ‘assessing the level of fitness for purpose’. Put more simply, quality assurance is ‘providing assurance that the university keeps its promises to its customers’, that the actuality lives up to the promotional material. Within quality assurance, a major concern is ensuring that quality is consistent throughout an institution. As the well-known saying goes, ‘a chain is only as strong as its weakest link’ – those responsible for quality assurance in our universities have a duty to ensure that the weakest link meets certain minimum standards.

A measure of value
Universities clearly need quality assurance policies and structures in place in order to meet statutory requirements but these should not be the primary reason for assessing quality. Quality assurance should be understood as a measure of the value of what we do and the system of benchmarks that we use to make sure that standards are maintained and improved where possible on a continual basis. Quality assurance is essential to a university's reputation. As Brennan and Shah (2000: 36) have pointed out,

"the public feature of greatest concern to most higher education institutions is their reputation, their public standing... Reputation breeds off itself. A good reputation is an excellent basis for future success. A good reputation can exist for many years after the factors responsible for it have largely disappeared. But reputation can also be damaged and a critical external assessment is something which has the potential to inflict major damage".
As noted in Chapter 1 (section 3), universities have always had forms of QA. These were based on self and collegial accountability and self-improvement. Universities trusted their staff, relying on the professionalism of academics and their standing in society. QA procedures included the very careful selection of teachers and students and peer review of research and scholarship. More recently, the quality of teaching has in addition been ensured through student evaluations and staff development activities specifically aimed at improving the performance of teachers in the classroom.

**Change in approach**

This change in approach has been associated with the era of massification in HE which has resulted in a greater diversity of students with a wide range in levels of preparedness for tertiary studies. In recent years there has been a strong trend towards formalisation of traditional QA systems, driven largely by the establishment of national QA agencies as governments have called for formal measures of accountability. In 1990, only France, the Netherlands and the UK had such agencies. A decade later there are more than fifty such agencies spread across the globe.

The introduction of quality assurance has coincided not only with increased participation levels in higher education but with declining state funding and national QA agencies being seen as an indirect means of distributing scarce resources. In addition, in countries with a strong tradition of university autonomy, national QA agencies have been viewed as a form of interference by the state. International experience has also demonstrated that QA systems that overly rely on compliance to externally imposed regulations may work against the interests of QA in the universities. This is partly because academics resist the interference in their work but chiefly because these sorts of regimes require an unacceptable sacrifice of time by academic staff who would otherwise be engaged in the core activities of teaching and research.

In short, quality assurance is 'providing an assurance that the university keeps its promises to its customers'. The customers range from a government that calls for greater accountability of public expenditure, to employers who want to know what they are getting, to the students who, quite rightly, are increasingly more demanding of institutions. Universities in South Africa are in competition for a small (and currently declining) pool of students and in the Internet era, students expect to be fully informed about what is on offer at a university. As noted earlier, good reputations are hard earned and easily damaged. The modern university has no choice but constantly to review and improve the quality of its academic activities, facilities and services.

Universities thus engage in quality assurance because it is in their interests to do so, and in our context, because of the statutory requirements that will be exercised via the HEQC. The focus of this report is on intra-institutional QA policies, structures and procedures which are viewed as being in the universities best interests. Engaging with an external quality agency such as the HEQC is dealt with as a separate topic in Chapter 10.

It is in the interests of universities to engage in quality assurance.
3. The Characteristics of Quality

Given some understanding of the concepts of quality appropriate to HE, and equally, some idea of what quality assurance is all about, the logical next step is to ask the questions:

What are the characteristics of a high quality university?

and

What should be assessed in order to come to a conclusion about quality?

If one goes shopping for a tangible manufactured product such as an item of clothing or a piece of furniture, there is a set of characteristics which consciously or otherwise is used to pass judgment in terms of quality. Some of the more important characteristics are:

- use of the best materials
- use of skilled labour
- care taken in production (i.e. the cut, fit and finish)
- design and style
- a good backup service
- the label – the manufacturer’s reputation

If, on the other hand, one were purchasing a service by hiring a lawyer or signing an insurance policy, then the set of characteristics of a good quality service would look somewhat different.

- use of properly trained/skilled personnel
- care and adequate time allocated to the task
- availability and accessibility of good backup service
- clarity about what is on offer
- reliability and consistency – the service is as promised
- a professional approach including trust and confidentiality.

When one registers at a university to undertake (say) a three-year degree programme, what is one paying for? A product? A service? Or something quite different?

At university the student enters an educational experience, the success or failure of which depends on a range of inputs from both the university and the student. The university is expected to provide a wide range of services, physical facilities and opportunities but ultimate success requires considerable effort and ability on the part of the student. Clearly the student and the university are in a type of partnership and if either party fails to perform, the other has grounds to be aggrieved.

When a student registers at a university, both parties are entering a contract. Quality assurance in a university context is aimed at ensuring that the university keeps its side of the contract. Much of what the university provides has the quality characteristics associated with the provision of a service with the student as the primary customer. However, the provision of more tangible benefits such as well equipped laboratories are better assessed in terms of the quality characteristics of a product. In short, a high quality university is one that fully plays its role in delivering on its promises in terms of the range of services, facilities and opportunities it offers to its students. The starting point of quality assurance is therefore a very clear understanding of what the university is offering.
Grandiose vision and mission statements have their place but are rarely sufficient to inform a student of what can be expected in the course of three years or more on campus. Some South African universities are currently drafting a student charter similar to those used by some European and North American universities. Such a charter is, in effect, a contract between the university and the student. It sets out in great detail what the student can expect from the institution. It deals with issues such as the teaching and learning experience, student support services and facilities which the student can expect to have available. It also makes clear what is expected of the student by the university in terms of academic effort and behaviour on campus.

4. Quality, Disadvantage and Access

As Wood (2001) points out, “the concepts of quality and disadvantage sit uneasily together”, and it is therefore understandable that the advent of a national QA system is seen as a threat by some institutions. The historically disadvantaged institutions (HDI’s) like all other HE institutions need to examine the relationship between notions of quality and the missions of their institutions, and grasp the associated challenges. As Wood (2001) so succinctly notes,

“Failure to engage positively with QA will mean that the HDI’s will forever be hampered by their history of disadvantage… The quality movement in higher education represents not only a challenge but also an opportunity for HDI’s. The opportunity lies in the fact that ultimately HDI’s have to justify themselves as offering a quality education or face oblivion. If there is a valid way of assessing institutional quality, this will be the only way in which HDI’s will finally be able to lay to rest perceptions of inferiority, since they will have the opportunity to demonstrate the quality of their offerings in a manner that is legitimate and widely accepted.”

Given the fitness for purpose notion of quality, the question must be asked whether the mission of an HDI should be significantly different from those of other universities. The mission must be realistic and the corresponding measures of quality must recognise that the institution that takes in students with very low levels of literacy and numeracy relative to other institutions, does have a different task to perform. The National Plan recognises that there will be different kinds of institutions in the South African HE system and that they will not all be judged against the same benchmarks. Both the national and intra-institutional QA systems must take into account the inputs to a university when judging its outputs. One of the tasks of the SNQAF is to conduct research into this area of QA in order to assist and advise on the implementation of QA which is sensitive to issues of disadvantage.

Student access to university education is clearly also an important dimension of QA systems in South Africa if QA is to evaluate the performance of those systems against agreed purposes. South African universities have a special responsibility to work towards equitable access of potential learners given the apartheid legacy. Studies in the UK and USA suggest a close correlation of socio-economic status, accumulated wealth and intellectual capital with access to HE and subsequent academic success. Hall (2000) notes,
“an effective QA system must take account of the ways in which institutions – all institutions – seek to correct the effects of prior disadvantage. ...if a quality assurance system is not designed to measure the effects and benefits of academic development, then it is likely to reward approaches to education that perpetuate the status quo”.

Parental asset levels affect the success of learners given that restrictions on the accumulation of wealth have been demonstrated to restrict the ability to accumulate intellectual capital. However, given that true equity of access to HE in South Africa cannot be achieved until the prior schooling system has been comprehensively reformed, much of the responsibility for building the social and intellectual capital of individual learners lies with the universities. Fortunately, studies such as that of Bowen and Bok (1998) have demonstrated that an individual’s social capital continues to be built throughout the first degree. In short, in a differentiated system, the students who gain access to the most valued qualifications will be those who have the advantage of rich assets in terms of wealth and intellectual capital.

“Because South Africa’s primary and secondary education systems will bear the scars of apartheid for several more lifetimes, and because poverty is overwhelmingly concentrated in the black population, a differentiated HE system brings with it the real and present danger of re-segregation, as is presently happening in the US” (Hall, 2002).

Without doubt, the starting point for quality assurance requires that each university very carefully examines its purpose, bearing in mind national HE imperatives as well as institutional strengths and characteristics. Out of this exercise must come clear statements of what potential students may expect from the university. At the national level the QA system must accommodate differentiation within the system and show particular sensitivity to issues of disadvantage and how institutions deal with this reality.

the quality movement in higher education represents not only a challenge but also an opportunity for HDI’s
Key points

1. The concept of quality most used in higher education is that of ‘fitness for purpose’ but other notions of quality may also be appropriate depending on the activity being assessed.

2. In essence, quality assurance is ‘providing an assurance that the university is keeping its promises to its customers’.

3. The starting point of quality assurance is a very clear understanding of what the institution is offering.

4. A high quality university is one that fully plays its role in delivering on its promises in terms of the range of services, facilities and opportunities that it offers to its students.

5. Good reputations are hard earned and easily damaged.

6. The national quality assurance system must accommodate diversity within the HE sector and show particular sensitivity to issues of diversity and how these are dealt with in the institutions.
Chapter 3
Policies, Structures and Management

At the outset we emphasise the need for institutional commitment to quality assurance. This is followed by the characteristics of good quality assurance policy and possible management structures for quality assurance. The point is then made that the ultimate success of quality assurance depends on active management of relevant policy. Finally, we consider the implications of the potential overlap between quality assurance and academic planning activities.

1. A Commitment to Quality Assurance

The one essential pre-requisite to the development of an effective QA system in a university is commitment from the very top. The university Council, Senate and Vice-Chancellor need to be formally committed to a high quality institution and the development of an effective QA system. Evidence of this commitment can take various forms but at a minimum it should be written into vision or mission statements and QA should be part of the portfolio of a senior academic manager such as a deputy vice-chancellor. As specific QA policy is developed, it needs formal acceptance in Senate and Council after going through the appropriate phases of consultation within the university community. Further, it is not sufficient for an institution to appoint a QA manager and then expect that everything will fall into place. She needs to be part of a system which includes policy, organisational structures and management. This QA system requires to be driven by a senior person whose involvement in quality is not because of mission statements and statutory requirements but because raising the quality of a university is one of the most rewarding tasks.

One SNQAF member, in response to a request from SAUVCA for details of institutional QA policies and structures had this to say:

“We have no QA office, no dedicated staff, no quality committee, no budget, no policies (I have tried for 18 months to get an assessment policy through Senate and this has not yet happened). The only QA we have is an external moderator system in which the effectiveness is seen only in small pockets.”
At the other extreme, some universities have had dedicated QA staff for most of the last decade and have developed effective QA policies and management structures. This chapter which describes the bases for policy development, QA structures and management, draws on the successes and failures of several of the universities. The collective wisdom of SNQAF members and their universities should provide a sound basis for the setting up and running of intra-institutional QA management systems.

2. Policies for Assuring Quality

Institutional culture

The effective introduction of important new policy in a university environment requires that the policy has widespread support and is sensitive to institutional culture. Universities are differentiated not only by their ‘purpose’ but also by the manner in which they conduct their business; particularly in respect of the management of academic activities which are at the heart of QA systems. Some universities commenced with QA by first building the necessary internal structures so that mechanisms were in place to facilitate widespread discussion and ‘buy-in’ on key issues before formal policy documents were written. Other institutions started with extensive statements of policy and the structures followed later. Neither approach is right or wrong – it is merely a matter of what is best suited to a particular institution. In the end, the three elements of a good QA system – the policy, the structures and the management are all interdependent and need to evolve together over time.

Policy documents contain a set of goals, values and practices and where the emphasis is placed is chiefly a reflection of university culture. Some universities have QA policies which go directly to the nuts and bolts of assuring good practice while other institutions preface their policy documents with lengthy intellectual debate about the very nature of policy and quality.

Policy and practice

Of necessity, policy documents need to have clearly stated objectives and contain statements which reflect university values. Further, policy and practice cannot really be separated and most statements of policy start with objectives and value statements and then describe good practice in some detail. Some of the universities have produced major policy frameworks for QA which set out a comprehensive approach to QA across the institution. Other universities have managed well without a central policy, relying on a series of policy and practice statements related to specific activities such as teaching and learning, or the supervision of postgraduate students. Webbstock (2001) has argued that in a relatively small and homogeneous university it is easier to work with a single central policy. Conversely, that in a complex decentralised organisation with high levels of autonomy it is more appropriate to develop a series of more localised policies. In practice however there appears to be no correlation between complexity of the institution and the route taken to QA policy.

some universities have produced major policy frameworks while others have managed well without a central policy
Policy characteristics
In short, effective policy has the following characteristics:

- Is based on sound and clearly stated concepts and objectives;
- Allocates responsibility;
- Is rooted in the nature of the institution;
- Is developmental rather than comparative;
- Is honest, reasonably transparent, and not threatening;
- Includes multi-year cycles of activity;
- Is developed through consensus;
- Uses peer assessment to validate judgments;
- Is adequately resourced;
- Is flexible and regularly reviewed; and
- States clearly the manner and frequency in which implementation of the policy will be evaluated.

3. Quality Assurance Structures

As is the case with policy, structures must fit in with institutional culture. Even though the details vary considerably across the university sector, the key elements of QA structures that have evolved are very much the same.

A QA committee
Clearly there needs to be a ‘main QA committee’ or group responsible for QA within the university. Given the importance of QA, a Senate committee, chaired by a deputy vice-chancellor is the preferred option of many institutions. Certainly the main driver of QA needs to be a senior and permanent member of the university management committee where the support and cooperation of senior colleagues, academic and administrative can be gained. Appointing a QA manager without a direct link to the executive seriously reduces the effectiveness of the QA staff. The QA committee would normally include faculty representatives, senior staff from support units such as the Academic Development Centre, students, the QA staff themselves and some representation of related administrative support units. Some universities have also formed faculty QA committees. A set of committees is found to be unnecessary in most institutions.

Academic link
If QA is to become imbued into the academic life of a university, it is more important that the main QA committee has a direct link to the academic departments and schools responsible for the delivery of a quality educational experience. As Legotto (2001) expresses it, “Academic quality is best guaranteed when responsibility for it is located as close as possible to the academic processes”. Regular meetings with departmental QA representatives in an internal QA forum facilitates communication and encourages debate relevant to the formulation and implementation of QA policies.
The QA committee may wish to set up specialist sub-committees in important areas such as teaching and learning, or to allow a degree of decentralisation on multi-campus universities.

A typical structure includes most of the following elements:

| **Senate** | The main academic authority |
| **QA committee** | A Senate committee. Chaired by deputy vice-chancellor. Overall responsibility for ensuring establishment of QA policy, structures and management thereof. Liaison with related committees such as higher degrees, teaching and learning |
| **Specialist sub-committee** | In important areas such as teaching and learning. Advises main committee on desired good practice. Assists in developing specific policy |
| **QA forum** | Main liaison between QA committee and academic departments and schools |
| **Review committees (ad hoc)** | Set up when necessary to conduct review exercises; May include external assessors |

**Staff complement**

While the deputy Vice-Chancellor/(Academic) may have the ultimate responsibility for QA, s/he will require at least one staff member dedicated full-time to QA activities and who executes the decisions of the QA committee. The number of QA staff will depend on the range of responsibilities allocated to the QA committee and its relationship with other committees responsible for related areas such as staff development and higher degrees. It matters little whether a higher degrees guide is prepared by the office of the Dean of Research or by the QA staff, or whether a workshop on academic leadership is organised by the Academic Development centre or a quality promotion unit but such issues do affect the number of staff required to handle QA activities. The important point is that there needs to be an appreciation of a shared responsibility.

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*the ultimate success of quality assurance depends on effective management*
4. Managing Quality Assurance

Responsibility for management

Writing good policy and having it approved by the relevant university authorities is no guarantee of effective implementation. Good policy and appropriate structures may be the basis of good QA, but its ultimate success depends on effective management. This responsibility falls to the deputy vice-chancellor and the QA staff. As will be seen in the following chapter, QA can and should be applied across the university, including not only academic departments and schools but also the many administrative and service divisions. That said, the core business of the university is academic business and the focus of QA is clearly on academic activities delivered by academic staff and the teaching units in which they function.

Approach

South African universities have long cherished the principles of academic autonomy and academic freedom, principles which extend down to the level of academic departments and individual lecturers. When university management sets up a process to monitor and evaluate core academic activities such as teaching and learning, it must do so with great sensitivity if it is to gain the support of the academic staff and teaching units involved. The multiple pressures for reform in South African universities over the past decade reflect both global trends and local imperatives and academic staff are already suffering from change fatigue. In several institutions a resistance to change and its attendant bureaucracy has emerged. The QA practitioner must go about her business very carefully indeed, and it is vital that whatever measures are taken in the name of QA do indeed work to enhance the quality of experience of learners and academics.

Good policy not only contains clear objectives and describes good practice, it also indicates clearly how actual practice will be evaluated. Given that the great majority of the people involved in shaping the academic experience are highly qualified, self motivated professionals, the most successful approach to management in QA has been based on self-evaluation and peer review. This process can be applied with success to a wide range of activities. Most academics also support customer opinion surveys (i.e. student evaluations) of their work and both of these topics – self-evaluation and student evaluation – are dealt with in some detail in later chapters.

The reasons for monitoring academic activities and managing QA in general need to be made clear. Apart from the obvious need to conform to the requirements of statutory bodies such as the HEQC, QA is most effective when approached with supportive and developmental motives – monitoring for continuous improvement. Evaluations should be used to identify things or processes which can be improved, and this in turn means that appropriate support mechanisms must be available. If there are weaknesses in the content or delivery of an academic programme, it may be time for curriculum review or a staff member may be advised to attend an Academic Development workshop on modern concepts in teaching and learning. In this example, policy on curriculum review should exist and the relevant workshop must be on offer.

Effective QA management is dependent on a range of support services being in place. Discussion on the actual monitoring of activities and ways in which this can be done will be found in the chapters dealing with specific areas of QA.
5. Quality Assurance and Academic Planning

The overlap in activities between QA staff and those engaged in academic planning is considerable and at least one university has combined these important functions under one director. This arrangement may not suit most universities but it does emphasise the need for very close cooperation between the QA practitioners and planning staff if they are to avoid a duplication of effort and unnecessarily annoying their academic colleagues.

Perhaps the most obvious overlap lies in the cyclical review of academic programmes, departments and schools. Such reviews and related data gathering exercises are time consuming and burdensome on departmental staff and conducting reviews for planning and QA purposes simultaneously makes good sense – particularly when academic programmes are offered largely by a single teaching unit. In one university, Faculty Deans have the discretion to combine departmental and programme reviews and this calls for the cooperation of academic planning and QA staff in order to minimise bureaucracy. Further, it is always a good idea to consult the customers – in this case the academic staff. Asked to conduct an evaluation of a teaching programme or academic department, most academics would choose to combine the needs of academic planning with those of QA in order to make the total task simpler and quicker.

Academic planning committees are normally responsible for evaluating proposals for new or revised educational programmes and this is also the best time to ensure that staffing, facilities, curriculum design and other aspects of QA are up to the desired standard. There are many other examples where the work of the planners and quality assurers needs to dovetail closely and this should be borne in mind by those responsible for designing institutional management structures.

Key points

1. Commitment from the top is an essential pre-requisite of an effective quality assurance system.
2. Assuring quality is dependent on the existence of clearly set out policies and procedures.
3. The implementation of QA policies and procedures depends on structures which define responsibilities and facilitate communication throughout the institution.
4. QA policies require active management which includes effective communication, monitoring, assessment and feedback.
5. Effective QA management requires that a range of support services be in place.
6. QA managers and academic planners should work closely together to avoid a duplication of effort.
7. QA managers must ensure that measures taken in the name of QA do indeed work to enhance the quality of the experiences of learners and academic staff.
Chapter 4
Areas for Implementation

We consider priority areas for the implementation of quality assurance across the university. The need to establish a quality assurance framework for the identification and implementation of quality assurance processes is noted and we describe three of the more frequently used approaches to the establishment of quality assurance frameworks.

1. Quality Across the University

Ideally, each and every member of the university community, staff and students alike, would strive for the highest possible quality in their university activities. Each person would be constantly evaluating her/his own efforts with the aim of continuous improvement. This ideal situation is never attained but the task of university QA practitioners is to work towards it.

Across the university people need to be informed about concepts of quality and the need for QA. Equally, in an ideal situation, QA processes would be applied to all of the institutions activities and services. However, the reality is limitations on time, money and human resources and the need to avoid overload. This makes it necessary to establish priorities, organise review exercises on a cyclical basis and ensure that reporting structures spread the responsibility for QA and quality improvement. While QA needs to be applied across the institution, the QA staff cannot and should not be involved in all matters. The key to their being able to hold their heads above water is the careful design of the QA system.

2. Priority Areas

Having noted the desirability of imbuing a consciousness of quality issues and the application of QA throughout the university, the practitioner has to start somewhere and priorities need to be set. Priorities in QA are normally a compromise between internal values and the demands emanating from an external quality agency. Fortunately for South Africans, the HEQC has set its priorities such
that they coincide with those of most universities. The Founding Document of the HEQC (2001: 7) notes that its focus will be on “the quality of teaching and learning activities, research and community service in order to deepen and extend the process of HE transformation”.

Teaching
The days of academic staff ‘lecturing’ to students on a ‘take it or leave it’ basis are largely over. With increasing calls for accountability, a consciousness of students as customers, and competition between institutions for good students, increasing attention has been paid to all aspects of the educational experience. Teaching and learning activities are core business for a university and considerable research and intellectual debate have focussed on this topic in the last decade. Across the globe, teaching and learning is currently the highest priority area for QA practitioners in HE. For this reason it is dealt with as a separate topic in Chapter 6.

Research
The responsibility for the QA of research varies from one university to another and it is seldom a direct responsibility of the QA office. Most universities have a ‘research committee’ often chaired by a Director or Dean of Research, or one of the deputy vice-chancellors and this committee is usually seen to be responsible for the management of all aspects of research. Some universities have included the QA of postgraduate studies within a central QA framework recognising that the postgraduate learning experience needs to be different from that of undergraduates. The one area which is often neglected is the quality of the research done by persons who are not students – for the most part the academic staff. It is usually argued that the quality of their work is tested by publication. Research committees and national research councils are however experiencing increased competition for scarce resources, and quality in research is of growing concern. This and other quality issues related to postgraduate studies are more fully explored in Chapter 8.

Community service
The QA of community service can at best be described as being in its infancy. This is largely because there is no generally accepted understanding of what activities constitute ‘community service’. Who constitutes the community’ of a particular university? Does community mean the local population close to the institution, or should community be defined in wider terms? What of the international academic community? One university states clearly that the best way it can serve the southern African community is by being a first class university. One of the country’s largest and well established institutions recently noted in an internal policy document that “the focus group that met to consider community service identified key parameters, but also recognised that (the university’s) reconceptualisation of its role in the local and regional community is still at an early stage”. This is the academic way of saying we still don’t know how to define community service! Although community service has been set as a high priority area for QA, little is likely to be achieved in this arena until there is a generally accepted definition of the phrase at the national level.
Infrastructure
In addition to the focus on teaching and learning, research and community service, the HEQC has indicated a concern for the quality of institutional infrastructure that is critical to the success of the high priority areas. These are sound management systems, particularly in respect of finances and human resources, and effective support services, especially in terms of information technology and information centres (libraries). QA in these areas is dealt with in general terms in Chapter 7 and more specifically in Chapter 8.

Central steering
It is interesting to note that at the time of writing, higher education institutions had just received from the national Department of Education a Manual for Annual Reporting of Higher Education Institutions (2001). The main purpose of the manual is “to define the standards prescribed for the content of the annual report including the financial statements required by (sic) public HEI’s in a manner that is consistent with accepted local and international standards and practice and is relevant to public HEI’s in South Africa” (2001: 11). Some 80% of this manual deals with financial reporting, the balance dealing with the content of reports from Council, Senate, the Institutional Forum and from the Vice-Chancellor. It also calls for reports on worker and student participation in institutional governance. The entire exercise constitutes a form of quality assurance at the institutional level carried out by the Department of Education. Universities have little choice but to give this exercise a high priority as well. The challenge for the university staff involved will be to minimise duplication of effort created by the requests of different authorities.

3. Designing a Quality Framework
One of the primary tasks of the QA manager is to draw up a checklist or framework for the identification and implementation of QA processes. The framework should indicate all major sections and activities of the university, their priority level and current status in terms of QA and where the reporting lines are. Some areas, such as teaching and learning, will most likely be the direct responsibility of the QA office but in others, such as research or the Registrar’s department, QA may be the responsibility of other university managers. The extent to which QA is up and running in each area should also be a matter of record so that at any time the QA manager is able to report on the status of QA across the university. There is no correct format for such a QA framework. Three quite different approaches used in several institutions are described below as examples.

The student career approach
In designing a framework for QA several universities have focussed on the student career; the reasoning being that the most valuable indications of quality will be those that relate to the way in which students are selected, criteria for the way in which they are taught and benchmarks for the quality of their learning environment. Using this approach, the areas for the implementation of QA are identified as one follows an undergraduate career through university.
The first areas relate to recruitment and enrolment. Critical at the outset is recruitment policy which has a direct bearing on the quality of inputs to the university system and should reflect the university’s mission. A range of assessment protocols may be used to identify latent academic ability in potential students that may not be demonstrated in school-leaving results. On the other hand, a recruitment policy which fails to select students with ‘the potential to succeed’, fails both the student and the university. QA of recruitment practices should include a view of alternative admissions policies (other than school-leaving results) and the various support services which make enrolment possible and support the new student once registered. Examples of these are sources of student loans and grants, and foundation programmes for students from disadvantaged educational backgrounds. Once selected, students must be given every opportunity for success and QA is vital to ensure that these aspects of a student’s career are well structured and effective. Once admitted, the monitoring of individual students and groups of students should be undertaken to assess the effectiveness of the various recruitment practices. The enabling environment should also be subject to quality review. The university has a duty to provide the infrastructure and services which facilitate teaching and learning and to develop an institutional environment that is conducive to good scholarship. In a practical sense this means the provision of well equipped and attractive teaching spaces such as tutorial rooms, lecture theatres and laboratories and essential services such as those associated with a well run library or computer laboratory. In residential universities it also means a careful review of the availability and quality of residences, student transport and clinics for physical and mental health. The aim of ensuring quality in these areas is to ensure that the environment is supportive of students so that they can focus their attention on their studies.

Following the student career approach, attention is then turned to areas such as undergraduate programme evaluation, the academic performance of students, and teaching and learning. The process is then repeated with respect to postgraduate students from recruitment and enrolment through to examination and assessment. All of these topics are considered in some detail in later chapters and need not be examined further at this point.

The attraction of the ‘student career’ approach to a QA framework is its logical progression from first year applicants through to postgraduate studies. The difficulty however is at any one stage in the QA process it is necessary to pull together a diverse range of elements which are part of the varied and complex student experience.

The departmental approach

A simpler framework for QA and one most easily applied in those universities in which academic programmes – or the courses that comprise them – are primarily the responsibility of a single department or school, is based on the academic and administrative units which make up the university. Every activity in the university, whether it be the offering of Microbiology II, maintaining contact with alumni, or repairing the squash court is the responsibility of a head of department or division. Carefully constructed review exercises can deal with all the activities and responsibilities of a department.
Clearly academic departments, schools and even faculties which are sometimes used as a basis for QA, will need to respond to a different set of review questions to those applied to administrative and service divisions. For example, the emphasis for academic departments may be on the implementation of teaching and learning policy while that for support divisions could focus on customer service and financial efficiency.

Reviews are normally run in cycles of three to five years. In a relatively small institution it is possible to review all academic units in one year and all the administrative units in the following year. Larger institutions spread the workload by reviewing departments on a faculty basis, doing one or two faculties per year and ensuring that each department is part of a five-year cycle. The reviews are based on carefully structured self-evaluation reports which are then considered by a committee of peers which may include external members with relevant expertise. Clearly the composition of review committees differs between academic and support departments although it has been found to be good practice to have some academics on review committees for administrative departments and vice versa. Details of review processes are provided in Chapter 7 on evaluation and self-evaluation.

The programme approach

Given the emphasis on educational programmes that has characterised major policy documents from the White Paper (1997) to the more recent National Plan for Higher Education (2001) some universities have structured their approach to QA around the provision of programmes. Increasingly, academic programmes are the basis of academic planning and are not based in single academic departments. This is particularly true in the case of the larger universities, and in those in which academic restructuring has resulted in a reduction in the number of single discipline departments in favour of schools which cover much larger subject areas. In such cases the focus on programmes rather than on teaching units makes good sense. In short, it can be argued that the quality of the student experience relates more to programmes than departments.

A sound case can therefore be made for operating a QA framework at two levels – at institutional and programme levels. While the primary focus is on academic programmes, the concept is easily extended to research and community service programmes. The programme approach is viewed by its proponents as taking its cue from the allocation of functional responsibilities within an institution. Administrative and service units can similarly be approached on the basis of their functional responsibilities.

three different approaches that institutions use are given as examples
Key points

1. Ideally, a consciousness of quality issues should be imbued in all staff.

2. Limitations of time, money and human resources make it necessary to establish priority areas for quality assurance.

3. One of the primary tasks of a QA manager is to draw up a checklist or framework for the identification and implementation of QA processes across the institution.
Chapter 5
Indicators, Benchmarks and Standards

We describe the nature of performance indicators and their applicability to higher education institutions before the benchmarking process is defined and several types of benchmarking are outlined. The SAQA concept of unit standards is introduced and current work on the setting of standards for generic qualifications is noted.

1. Performance Indicators

During the 1980s performance models for universities were introduced in a number of countries. As Melck (2001: 2) points out, these models

"were designed to introduce accountability in public sector institutions and improve the levels of service delivery in the public sector in general. These developments were accompanied by an increasing emphasis on efficiency, effectiveness and productivity in emulation of private sector managerial practices".

The introduction of these concepts necessitated the development of statistical mechanisms for quantifying and measuring performance. Known as 'performance indicators' these mechanisms were associated with the language of total quality management, re-engineering and similar managerial practices. The application of business practices within the public sector led to a change in public sector culture. Calls for greater levels of accountability have inevitably impacted on universities, and the establishment of national QA agencies should be seen in this light.

The use of performance indicators to evaluate higher education institutions should be approached with caution. In the first instance, if data are to be compared across institutions, and particularly, if data are to be used to classify institutions in some way, it is essential that there are no definitional ambiguities and that databases are stable. Further, while some aspects of performance or service delivery may be fairly assessed in quantitative terms, others are
not. There is always the danger of trying to quantify the immeasurable and, in making a selection from a range of possible indicators, the underlying values need to be clearly understood. To argue that teaching and research can be assessed in terms of performance indicators runs contrary to the whole nature of good scholarship. Further, “being the complex institutions that they are, universities generally need to balance what may at times be conflicting goals” (Melck, *Ibid.*) where inefficiencies in one activity may be tolerated because of efficiencies in a complementary activity. Performance indicators however make no provision for trade-offs.

Finally, a fair interpretation of performance indicators cannot be achieved without reference to the context of a particular institution. It has also been argued that the costs associated with the compilation of some indicators outweigh the benefits. Fortunately however, a move away from statistical performance indicators towards benchmarking as a process is now well under way.

### 2. Benchmarking

A benchmark is a term used in surveying to denote a survey peg or stone used as a permanent reference point. In more general terms it denotes a reference point against which other things can be measured. In the language of quality assurance, benchmarking is defined as

> “the formal and structured process of searching for those practices which lead to excellent performance and the observation and exchange of information about these practices” (Meade, 1998).

Benchmarking assumes that excellence and adding value are goals of all managers in the university. “It is about learning from others in order to improve yourself” (Fourie & van der Westhuizen, 2001).

Benchmarking provides a structured approach to quality improvement and also brings an external (sometimes international) approach to internal activities. It is about measuring ones own products, services and practices against those of market leaders or perhaps ones closest competitors. It also requires that a critical analysis of internal operations is undertaken, and this exercise itself has great value in terms of assuring quality.

It is generally accepted that benchmarking should be used on an ongoing systematic basis. It should not be a once-off operation. Depending on the nature of the activity or process being evaluated, benchmarks may be expressed in quantitative terms – as performance indicators. The essential difference between performance indicators and benchmarks being that the former are data driven and the latter process orientated. Both can be deployed in the search for high quality. One of the few concerns with respect to benchmarking in the university sector is that it has a tendency to encourage uniformity especially where statistical norms are adopted.

**benchmarking is about establishing reference points**
A CHEMS study of 1998 distinguishes five types of benchmarking:

- **Internal benchmarking** occurs where comparisons are made between different sections of the same institution. Looking at relatively successful sections of an institution may be of benefit to other sections.

- **External competitive benchmarking** is where comparisons are made with a competitor. Acquiring accurate information about competitors may be difficult but it is common practice in industry and commerce to compare oneself with the perceived best.

- **External collaborative benchmarking** is done with the willing participation of other institutions in the same sector. This could be ‘within the South African university system’.

- **Trans-industry benchmarking** occurs where comparisons are made across sectors and even national borders in order to find examples of best practice. For example, it may be that teaching practice in the training division of an Australian motor manufacturer contains useful ideas for our universities.

- **Implicit benchmarking** refers to situations where many of the steps of formal benchmarking are followed without a conscious effort to use formal procedures. This often occurs where knowledge of practices across a sector influences the actions of institutional decision makers.

Within an institution, several approaches to benchmarking are possible. Two of the more common approaches are known as vertical/horizontal and output/process benchmarking. In the former case, vertical benchmarking examines process and performance in terms of discrete functional areas such as an academic department, whereas horizontal benchmarking examines practice and performance within one or more processes that cut across the functional and organisational areas (i.e. curriculum review practice across all academic departments). In the second approach, output benchmarking compares the outputs of specific activities between organisations and process benchmarking compares the systems used by organisations in order to achieve results.

In summary, benchmarking is a formal structured approach to:

- Identifying best practice;
- Comparing own practice with best practice;
- Being aware of alternative approaches; and
- Learning from others.

This report, which reflects current thinking and best practice in quality assurance in South African universities, will assist members of SAUVA to learn from each other, and in this sense it is an exercise in benchmarking.
3. Standards

With respect to the NQF, the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) has two primary tasks: to set standards and assure quality. In the language of SAQA, standards are more correctly described as ‘unit standards’ which are defined as “registered statements of desired educational and training outcomes and their assessment criteria” (SAQA website, 2000). As Gevers (2001: 4) points out,

“The original conception of the NQF was one where a universe of about 50 000 unit standards would be registered across 12 fields of activity, each standing alone and being quality assured at a unit level. Qualifications would be prescribed combinations of registered unit standards…”.

In order to set standards, SAQA has set up National Standards Bodies (NSB’s) and Standards Generating Bodies (SGB’s). There are 12 NSB’s, one for each of the organising fields (of knowledge) which must perform the following functions:

- Define the boundaries of its field;
- Define and recommend to SAQA a framework of sub-fields for the establishment of SGB’s;
- Recognise SGB’s and monitor their activities; and
- Recommend to SAQA the registration of standards and qualifications.

The number of SGB’s is dependent on the number of sub-fields across all the NSB’s. At the time of writing this was approaching 200. The functions to be performed by the SGB’s are as follows:

- Generate standards and qualifications in its sub-field;
- Update and review standards;
- Recommend standards and qualifications to NSB’s; and
- Recommend criteria for the registration of assessors and moderators or moderating bodies.

Mostly as a result of pressure from higher education, SAQA has allowed the original conception of the NQF to be considerably modified. Among the more important changes is the acceptance that whole qualifications not based on unit standards can be registered on the NQF. Instead, these qualifications have specified exit outcomes and integrative, formative and summative assessment of the whole qualification. This has permitted the universities to register whole qualifications – generic degrees such as the BA, BCom, and BSc.

With respect to quality assurance, the inclusion of professional councils and boards as Education and Training Quality Assurers (ETQA’s) has added to the complexity of the system. With the advent of the Skills Development Act, several dozen Sectoral Education and Training Authorities (SETA’s) will also operate as ETQA’s.
“There can be no doubt that the modifications to the original NQF concept, while being essential for the system to span General, Further and Higher Education, have rendered the NQF much more complicated, and considerable confusion has arisen because the Act itself and especially the subsequent regulations have reflected both the original model as well as the modifications introduced afterwards” (Gevers, 2001: 6).

At the time of writing, the report of the SAQA review committee is awaited, but the higher education institutions are optimistic that they will face simpler systems for the setting of standards, registration and accreditation of their educational programmes in the near future.

Currently there are some 5 000 university qualifications which enjoy interim registration (effective to mid 2003) which currently provides the basis for quality assurance in the HE sector. The university sector is soon to learn of the manner in which quality assurance in terms of programme accreditation will be affected. In the meantime, a SAUVCA project, using the expertise of Faculty Deans across the university sector, is working to establish generic qualification standards for the BA, BSc, BCom, BSc(Eng), and LLB degrees. This project includes groundbreaking work on level descriptors and qualification descriptors. Together with the SAQA review report and the recently released New Academic Policy for Programmes and Qualifications in HE these documents will determine the manner in which standards are defined and assessed. Quality assurance practitioners should follow these processes closely, bearing in mind that they will be directly involved in monitoring standards and assuring the promised outcomes.

simpler systems are needed for standards setting, programme registration and accreditation
Key points


2. If data are to be used to compare institutions or classify them, it is essential that there are no definitional ambiguities and that databases are stable.

3. Benchmarking is the formal and structured process of searching for those practices which lead to excellent performance and the observation and exchange of information about them.

4. Qualifications which are not based on unit standards may be registered on the NQF.

5. Generic qualification standards including level and qualification descriptors are being set up for the BA, BSc, BCom, BSc(Eng), and LLB degrees.
Chapter 6
Teaching and Learning

We emphasise the importance of quality assurance in teaching and learning before possible strategies and systems for quality assurance are outlined. Examples of specific teaching and learning policies are provided and we explain the need for staff and student support activities and the active management of teaching and learning policy. Finally the evaluation of teaching and the use of student feedback is considered.

1. Introduction

The report of the National Commission on Higher Education (1996) identified the assurance of quality in Teaching and Learning (T&L) as a key factor in the transformation of HE in South Africa. This point was emphasised in the White Paper (1997) and in the subsequent Higher Education Act of 1997. More recently the HEQC has indicated that quality assurance in the field of T&L will receive a high priority. If further evidence is needed of the priority status of T&L, one has only to look at university mission statements. Virtually everyone commits the university to good teaching and the creation of an environment supportive of learners. Earlier discussion has described QA quite simply as ensuring that the institution delivers on its promises. Nowhere are university promises more put to the test than at the teaching-learning interface.

Assuring quality in T&L requires a sensitive approach and it is a difficult arena in which to work. Academics have traditionally enjoyed autonomy in the lecture room and research has long been privileged over teaching and community service when it comes to promotion. Further, because everyone has the experience of being educated in some way, the field of education is disadvantaged by being too familiar. The result is, as Boughey (2001) points out,

“many people working as educators claim a degree of expertise in the field which, when examined, is found to consist only of a set of unexamined assumptions about what is good practice. Challenging experience in order to build expertise is then by no means an easy task as these practices tend to be deeply rooted and hard to dislodge”.

In the words of Sagen et al, “No profession appears to prepare its members so poorly, or devote as little effort to continuing in-service development, as does higher education”. This comment, made in 1972, is still largely true today although there are encouraging signs of shifts in thinking. It is interesting to note that a 1997 report of a National Committee of Enquiry in HE (in the UK) stated that “to achieve world class higher education teaching, it should become the norm for all permanent staff with teaching responsibilities to be trained on accredited programmes”. All new entrants to HE teaching in the United Kingdom will in the near future be required to have a higher educator’s qualification. South African universities have recently begun to place a greater emphasis on the value of good teaching. Some universities have clearly listed teaching ability as a criterion for promotion, and several have instituted medals and other awards for outstanding university teachers. Staff are also encouraged to gain a qualification in HE such as the Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education. The status of the good teacher is thus on the increase.

This chapter sets out to describe approaches to assuring quality in T&L in South African universities. The good news is that much has already been achieved and individual and institutional attitudes to T&L are changing for the better. Institutions are establishing policy frameworks and an increasing proportion of academic staff recognise the need to pay special attention to the quality of their teaching given the context in which they teach.

2. A Systematic Approach

The quality assurance of T&L, like that of any other university activity, needs to be carefully planned. The actual framework or system adopted matters little as long as the essential issues are covered and the QA manager has a current understanding of the quality status of each aspect of T&L. As noted earlier, assuring quality at the T&L interface is a difficult and sensitive task for the QA manager whose activities impinge on the autonomy of individual teachers and on teaching units. In this sense the strategy that is adopted in order to spread awareness of the issues at stake, and support for the QA measures that are decided on, is key to the success of assuring quality in this sensitive area. Clearly the strategy adopted must fit the culture of the institution and strategies vary considerably across the university sector.

At least one institution has produced a major strategic plan for T&L. The plan relates to the university vision for “quality teaching, the constant renewal of T&L programmes and the creation of effective opportunities for learning/study”. The plan identifies critical performance areas and requires that all faculties will have an explicitly formulated faculty strategy for T&L. The document describes modern philosophies in T&L and sets out in great detail actions to be taken in implementing the strategy. It also sets out details of specific policies such as on assessment. In contrast to this approach another large university has gone directly to the development of specific T&L policies arguing that it is exceptionally difficult to devise a single overall policy that will gain acceptance across a multi-faculty, multi-campus university. As noted earlier, the strategy must fit the campus.

in terms of quality assurance of T&L much has been accomplished across the sector
Despite variations in approaches to T&L, the range of issues tackled and the variety of actions taken to ensure quality at the teaching-learning interface are much the same across the university sector. The emphasis does vary from one institution to another. In some cases the focus is on the quality of teaching, elsewhere it is on the student. Several institutions operate a more balanced strategy. Mosia (2001) calls for capacity development in teaching methodologies, with an emphasis on new technologies, a peer review culture with a view to improvement and not sanctions, and a co-ordinated programme of learner support.

In some universities the implementation of T&L policy is centralised (normally in an Academic Development Unit) and in others implementation is a faculty responsibility. Whatever the locus of implementation, the key elements of an effective QA strategy or system include:

- An implementation strategy;
- Developing specific policies related to key areas in T&L;
- Support for teachers and learners;
- Active management of T&L policies;
- A quality learning environment.

Conventionally the quality of the teaching environment is the responsibility of some group other than those whose focus is on the actual teaching-learning experience. Again, it matters little who is responsible for this aspect, as long as the responsibility is clear and the matter in hand.

Certainly there needs to be regular (annual) reporting to Senate on the state of the teaching environment. This environment includes all formal teaching spaces which at a minimum need to be fully functional, technologically up to date, clean, safe and able to accommodate properly the classes that use them. Ideally such spaces would also be visually attractive, air-conditioned where necessary and capable of facilitating the full range of teaching modes. Good library facilities, quality work spaces and easy access to modern computer laboratories with Internet links for all students are also part of a good learning environment.

In the fullest sense, the learning environment encompasses more than just physical facilities. It would include a relatively stress-free campus with sound interpersonal and inter-group relationships – an environment which permits individual freedom within reasonable bounds. Creating an environment conducive to good scholarship is a task for all university employees but the QA manager has an important role to play in identifying problem areas and bringing these to the attention of university management.

### 3. Policies in Teaching and Learning

The development and use of policy on T&L shifts the development of capacity as an educator into the realm of professionalism and quality assurance. Policy embodies a set of institutional beliefs about ‘good’ in T&L and about the way that ‘good’ practice is achieved. In doing so it provides a set of benchmarks for institutional practice which can then be supported and managed. Key to the development of effective policy is the need for guidance rather than control or prescription.
Approaches to policy formulation in T&L stretch along a continuum, which ranges from simple guidelines to closely prescribed practice. Some universities have adopted a set of overall guiding principles leaving individual teachers to decide on how these should be interpreted in the classroom, while other institutions have gone to the other extreme of setting out detailed descriptions of good practice and how it should be evaluated. As is often the case in such situations, the middle road makes the most sense and institutional approaches to QA must be in tune with institutional culture. In a few cases, broad guidelines are supplemented with more specific statements of policy and procedure.

A good example of a set of broad guiding principles can be found in the 1996 Guidelines for Quality Assurance produced by the (now superseded) Higher Education Quality Council in the United Kingdom. An abridged version of their principles on T&L and on assessment is set out below.

### Teaching and Learning

- Learning is a partnership between the teachers and the professional support staff and both groups should be involved in the development of good practice in teaching, learning and assessment.
- Students at all levels should be given clear information about the relationships between achievement and assessment, academic progress and the accumulation of credits.
- Detailed and up to date records of student progress should be kept. Throughout a programme of study, students should receive prompt and helpful feedback about their performance and progress so that they can appropriately direct their subsequent learning activities.
- Regular appraisal, informed by appropriate external benchmarks, should be used at all levels to monitor the effectiveness of T&L strategies. Through evaluation of its policies and practices an institution should seek continuous improvement of the learning environment, the educational opportunities available to its students and the quality and academic standards of the education it provides.

### Assessment

- Institutions should ensure that assessment rules and regulations are published in a full and accessible form and made freely available to students, staff and external examiners.
- Assessment practices should be fair, valid, reliable and appropriate to the level of award being offered. Assessment should be undertaken only by appropriately qualified staff, who have been adequately trained and briefed and given regular opportunities to update and enhance their expertise as assessors.
- Boards of examiners and assessment panels have an important role in overseeing assessment practices and maintaining standards and institutions should develop policies and procedures governing the structure, operation and timing of assessment.
- Institutions should have in place policies and procedures to deal fairly and expeditiously with problems which arise in the assessment of students. These should define the actions to be taken in cases of academic misconduct and the grounds for student appeals against assessment outcomes.
The writing of highly specific T&L policy (e.g. which might include instructions as to how many written assignments a student should produce in the second year of a humanities course, or how much time staff have to mark and return them) is not recommended. Such policies are not compatible with a university environment and are not discussed further here. However, given the importance of T&L in the context of QA, an example of three related guideline policies is set out below. These policies are designed to cohere well. For example, assessment is perceived as part of curriculum development since it is required to be used to develop as well as measure learning.

Further, curricula need to be developed using learning outcomes as a basis for design and validity in assessment is achieved by aligning assessment with outcomes. Evaluation is perceived as a tool for the development of curricula and assessment practices. The principle which underpins the assurance of quality in this case is that of reflective practice. Academic staff are required to evaluate their practice in an ongoing manner and to use insights gained from evaluation to develop their work further. The concept of ‘good’ teaching used is that where ‘good’ is relative and context dependent.

The policies are set out in detail as a guide to preparing policies which will need to be tuned to the specific needs of different institutions. In the interests of brevity, the introductions to each policy, which for the most part cover matters dealt with elsewhere in this report, have been omitted.

1) Curriculum development and review

Principles

- Learning outcomes which include knowledge and understanding of a subject as well as cognitive, general and professional skills should be explicitly stated for each course or programme and these should be the pivot around which the whole course is developed. This is in line with SAQA and NQF requirements.

- Consultation is the key feature of curriculum development. The question to be asked is not what the lecturers can offer, but what the needs of the learners and society are. Stakeholders should therefore be co-developers of a curriculum. These normally include current and past students, academics, professional bodies and employers in both the private and public sectors.

- Reviewing processes should be part of a curriculum plan in order to accommodate new ideas and knowledge as well as to avoid rigidity. Such changes should be informed by developments in the world of learning as well as movements in a particular discipline.

- Equity and redress are issues that need to be accommodated in the curriculum. The curriculum needs to have a clear plan on how learners who do not have adequate academic preparation will be accommodated and developed. In short, it needs to be clearly stated how learners with differential entry levels can all reach the same exit levels.

- Diversity of the student body and teaching personnel calls for a curriculum which is sensitive to different backgrounds and outlooks of those engaged in the T&L process.
In the development of curricula, departments/schools should clearly formulate their aims as well as learning outcomes. This will facilitate the identification of specific outcomes for various courses and modules. Such planned outcomes need to be explicitly communicated to learners and should appear in the university calendar and other relevant documents.

In addition to specifying outcomes, curricula should be learner-centred and describe content, skills to be mastered and fundamental viewpoints. The nature of the learning experience including teaching methods and forms of assessment of learner attainment should be clearly stated.

The regular review of curricula should be standard practice in every department. Given the rapid pace of change, it is suggested that curricula should be reviewed every three years and that at six year intervals a more comprehensive overhaul should be undertaken.

In developing and reviewing curricula, wide consultation should take place with students, key players, potential employers and academics from other institutions. Interdisciplinary curriculum planning should be encouraged.

In planning curricula, departments should accommodate as far as possible the diverse linguistic, cultural and religious backgrounds of learners. Support and development programmes to facilitate access to courses by those students that need such services should be clearly outlined.

Heads of departments/course co-ordinators will be required to report via the T&L committee to Senate on a regular basis in respect of their development and review of curricula.

2) The evaluation of teaching and courses

Principles

Evaluation is a complex function requiring an appropriate combination of methods including self-assessment, student perception surveys, peer review, external examiners, portfolios, alumni feedback and audits.

While the university has overall responsibility for the quality of its courses and teaching, the primary responsibility for evaluation lies with the academic staff, normally the lecturer who is teaching or co-ordinating a course, in consultation with the Head of Department.

The use of evaluation data or results requires the agreement of the person evaluated.

The involvement of an impartial party in the process of evaluation increases its credibility.

Evaluation should include both formative and summative components. Formative, ongoing evaluation during a course assists early identification of problems while summative evaluation should be used for a general review of an entire course or period of teaching.

Staff whose practice is evaluated must be supported and have opportunities for continuous professional development.
Policy

- Academic staff are encouraged to build a teaching portfolio which can be used as evidence of teaching quality. The portfolio is required for staff on probation, or applying for promotion and must include, as a minimum, a survey of student perceptions and peer review.
- Departments must develop procedures for conducting evaluations of teaching and courses. These procedures should outline methods and systems and ensure regular but not excessive evaluation.
- Departments are encouraged to use the evaluation services offered by the Academic Development Centre where appropriate. These services will be approved by the T&L Committee from time to time.
- All evaluations should ensure a balanced gathering of evidence with respect to the range of stakeholders, the various dimensions of teaching and courses and the physical and organisational environment.
- The Head of each department/school will be expected to report annually to the T&L Committee on the evaluation procedures in place in the Department.

3) The assessment of student learning

Principles

- Assessment is viewed as an integral part of teaching and curriculum development. This means it should be used to develop as well as measure learning.
- Since assessment can be used both to maintain and challenge existing social structures, assessment practices need to be transparent and assessors need to be accountable.

Policy

The principles above have been used to develop the points of policy listed below. Although the focus is on assessing previously identified learning outcomes, it is acknowledged that assessment is a creative process, both in terms of its dialogical nature and in terms of the assessor’s role in responding to unexpected and unstated outcomes. It is to be expected, especially at tertiary level, that learners will respond creatively and unexpectedly to the learning process. Assessors need to be responsive to this and be prepared to reward innovative and creative thinking.

- Assessment procedures determine whether or not students have met the stated learning outcomes of a course, module or programme. Assessors therefore need to ensure that their assessment is valid in terms of the outcomes it is intended to assess.
- Assessment also functions to guide students towards achieving outcomes. As such, assessment should be varied (in order to accommodate different learning styles and in order to develop and assess all outcomes) and frequent (in order to provide as much guidance to learners as possible).
Assessment criteria should be openly and clearly communicated to students in the interests of transparency and accountability and also to enable students to use those criteria to monitor and develop their own learning. To this end students should also be provided with feedback which details the extent to which their work has, or has not, met those criteria.

A process to monitor consistency in assessment between assessors within departments and the university should be in place.

The proportionate weighting of whole year assessment and final examinations should be carefully considered in order to justify the amount of time and effort expended on each.

Academic staff will be provided with support in order to meet the requirements of sound assessment practice.

Heads of departments/course co-ordinators will be required to submit an annual report to the T&L committee detailing their assessment procedures. This information could form part of a more comprehensive report on measures undertaken to ensure quality in T&L within a department, such as evaluation and on-going curriculum development.

4. Support and Management

The development of policy is not a sufficient condition to assure quality since many staff are unable to meet policy requirements without support programmes. Both staff development and learner support are critical to a systemic approach to assuring the quality of T&L. The provision of support to teaching staff needs to be sensitive to the fact that teaching has long been a private and individualised endeavour and that opening up teaching practice to scrutiny can be very threatening. Academic staff are unlikely to be open about their practice and seek support if that support is linked to the ‘policing’ of policies. This means that those who provide support cannot also police policy.

Support and development programmes for academic staff can take many forms. Some examples being:

- Workshops on T&L policies;
- Computer programmes which assist staff to build questionnaires for student evaluations;
- Analysis of completed questionnaires;
- Peer review;
- Conducting focus group interviews to elicit student perceptions;
- Assessor training; and
- Certificated programmes leading to a qualification in higher education.
As Mosia (2001) points out,

“The other dimension is focussing on the learner. This is done by way of preparing learners for change in the way they assimilate and apply the knowledge (transformative notion of quality) obtained in instructional offerings”.

One of the approaches introduced by way of preparing for change is the adoption of the concept of evidence-based learning as an innovative teaching and learning format.

The final element in a systemic approach to QA in T&L is active management of the policies. Without management, policy requirements are unlikely to be met. The management of policies does have to be sensitive to the many demands on academics made by the bureaucrats but adequate systems of reporting must be set up. In each of the policies listed above, the head of department or course co-ordinator is required to report annually to the T&L committee. In this way the university gets a view across all teaching units or programmes and progress can be monitored from year to year. The T&L committee has the responsibility of analysing departmental reports and producing a consolidated document for Senate, which would include recommendations for action aimed at improvement. If approved, the T&L committee would then have the task of putting into effect its own recommendations.

The actual methods of management and reporting are not critical but the process is. Without active management T&L policy may well be little more than a paper document.

5. Evaluation

In an attempt to ensure the quality of learning experiences, and in response to requirements of national QA agencies, many universities have introduced evaluation procedures as a means of ensuring good teaching. The evaluation of teaching and course design has seldom been accompanied by questioning the assumptions which underpin practices and the implications which stem from them. As a result there are tensions inherent in the evaluation process.

The first relates to the ‘policing’ of policy and practices. While some policing on the part of institutional managers is necessary, fear of being revealed as a ‘poor’ teacher can cause individuals to act in ways designed to result in good evaluations. Staff may ‘play the system’ pandering to student preferences in order to receive good results. As Boughey (2001) notes, “Aiming at a system of evaluation which ensures that problems in teaching and course design are identified and addressed while simultaneously providing a space for individuals to examine and develop their teaching practice is thus a matter of concern”.

Chapter 6 • Teaching and Learning
The second tension inherent in evaluation pertains to the relationship between surveillance and autonomy. By participating in the evaluation of their own courses and teaching (even if only handing out questionnaires to students), academics become agents in their own surveillance. Calls for accountability and transparency may well be appropriate to professional academic practice but the tension between autonomy and surveillance remains.

A third tension relates to the contrast between corporate management and academic governance. Lemmer (1998) notes that pressures at national and international levels have resulted in universities being forced into adopting internal operating modes from business. Unfortunately, corporate management styles sit uncomfortably with traditional modes of academic governance. Protecting the individual’s right to develop curricula and teaching according to her own understanding of the discipline is thus in tension with the need for efficiency and throughput, and all too often evaluation is part of this process.

Two approaches
Boughey (2001) has proposed two approaches to evaluation: the ‘policing’ model and the ‘learning’ model. In the former, good teaching and course design are uniform across all contexts and are therefore amenable to evaluation by (often detailed) questionnaires. In the learning model, ‘good’ in teaching is relative and context dependent. In this case the teacher is required to define what is ‘good’ in a specific context and to examine and make explicit the assumptions about learning which underpin their criteria for good teaching. With this model, good teaching and course design are validated by evaluation tools which are specially designed for the purpose. The learning model requires educators to be reflective about their practice and these self-critical reflections often form the basis of teaching portfolios. Reflective practice also has the potential to promote ‘excellent’ rather than ‘good’ teaching. It requires educators to go beyond the need to meet a set of benchmarks which, because of the need for widespread application, tend to be set at minimum levels.

Proponents of the policing model of evaluation claim that it is objective and suited to statistical analysis. As a result, analysis of evaluation data assumes an objectivity associated with the positivist paradigm and is described as being more ‘scientific’, this in spite of the fact that a social practice such as teaching does not lend itself to providing proof in the normal scientific sense.

Control over the tools of evaluation
A further question relates to who designs the evaluation tools. In the policing model this is done by some central authority which also analyses data and reports on results and, in so doing, creates a new tension between itself and the academic staff. By contrast, the learning model leaves lecturers to construct and justify their own evaluation tools. The learning model also prevents evaluation fatigue on the part of students. The table below (after Boughey, 2001) summarises the distinction between the two models, and QA practitioners need to make informed decisions about the most feasible approach to follow in specific contexts.
### The Policing model

- Uniform notion of good
- ‘Philosophy’ behind criteria not always made explicit
- Criteria for ‘goodness’ very general
- Blanket evaluation tools intended to measure everyone against this notion of good
- Objectivity valued
- Central administration of evaluation tools and analysis of evaluation data on a predetermined basis
- Public scrutiny of evaluation data
- Evaluation often linked to promotion, remuneration and management models of QA

### The Learning model

- ‘Good’ understood as relative and context dependent
- Philosophy made explicit by individuals
- Criteria for goodness usually very specific
- Evaluation tools developed to investigate context dependent understandings of ‘good’
- Subjectivity acknowledged – triangulation of data in order to achieve consensus
- Evaluation conducted by individuals on a need to know basis
- Evaluation part of reflective practice
- Culture of evaluation part of learning organisation comprised of learning individuals

Evaluation procedures are a means of ensuring quality learning experiences, yet there are tensions that must be acknowledged.
6. Feedback from Students

Most universities collect feedback from students about their experience of the institution. This form of evaluation usually serves two purposes:

- For internal use to guide improvement (QA); and
- For information for stakeholders and potential students.

Student views are usually collected via questionnaires distributed in classes or residences. Rarely are such views elicited by personal interviews given the cost factors involved. Commonly, feedback will include perceptions of teaching and learning, the learning environment and support facilities. Harvey (2001) comments,

“to make an effective contribution to internal improvement processes, views of students need to be integrated into a regular and continuous cycle of analysis, reporting, action and feedback”.

Few institutions have realised that it is more important to ensure an appropriate action cycle than it is to have in place mechanisms for collecting data, and even fewer make the outcomes of student surveys freely available.

Student satisfaction surveys – often used in the QA of T&L – may be used at several levels, i.e.:

- Institutional level
- Faculty level
- Programme level – BCom
- Course/module level
- Appraisal of individual teachers
- 5 years after graduation – tracer studies.

Clearly space prohibits a set of sample questionnaires that might be applied to the six levels described and in any event such questionnaires would need to be tailored to fit institutional needs and culture.

A word of caution in respect of appraisals of individual teachers is offered. Harvey (2001) notes that “student appraisal of teachers tends to be a blunt instrument”. It has the potential to identify very poor teaching but the results seldom indicate how things can be improved. Student appraisal results are rarely much use for incremental and continuous improvement. In most cases there is no feedback to students about outcomes. This is mainly because views on individual teacher performance are usually deemed to be confidential.
The following are therefore recommendations:

- Sparing use of student appraisal of teaching – avoid endlessly repeating the process;
- Ask questions about student learning as well as teacher performance;
- Ensure that action is taken and seen to be taken to resolve and monitor problems that appraisals identify;
- It is counterproductive to ask students for information and then not use it – students become cynical and uncooperative as a result.

Harvey et al (1977) have described a comprehensive approach to student satisfaction surveys in their *Student Satisfaction Manual*, and QA practitioners engaged in compiling questionnaires for students would do well to consult this source. Certainly a strong case is made for such surveys to be part of a culture of continuous quality improvement (CQI).

“To be effective, staff must be convinced that the satisfaction survey is part of the CQI process and not a vehicle for recrimination. Distrust can be minimised if everyone knows what is going on and that something actually happens, to improve the institution, as a result of a survey. In summary to gain support and trust:

- The process must be transparent
- Senior management must be committed
- Action should result – resources must be made available
- The agenda for change must be forward looking (not recriminatory).”

A continuous cycle of analysis, reporting, action and feedback is important.
Key points

1. The teaching and learning interface is currently the highest priority area for QA managers in South Africa.

2. South African universities are placing greater emphasis on good teaching and the status of the good teacher is on the increase.

3. Good teaching is relative and context dependent. Good teaching is based on the lecturer as a learning individual who constantly reflects upon and modifies teaching practice.

4. There is a need to develop specific policies within teaching and learning and these require active management systems.

5. Support and development of academic staff is critical to the success of teaching and learning policies.

6. Learner support programmes are required to enable learners to gain full value from educational opportunities.

7. The evaluation of teaching practices requires great sensitivity and a ‘learning’ model is proposed.

8. The views of students need to be integrated into a regular and continuous cycle of analysis, reporting, action and feedback.
Chapter 7
Evaluation and Self-evaluation

The regular review of academic and administrative units is proposed and we consider the nature, objectives and content of evaluation exercises for both types of organisational units. We also describe the psychology and effectiveness of self-evaluation as a process and outline the setting up of self-evaluation exercises for academic and administrative units.

1. Introduction

Following a focus on teaching and learning and evaluation in that context, attention now turns to the evaluation of teaching and administrative units within universities. The regular, cyclical evaluation of academic departments, schools and faculties is an established feature in the majority of South African universities although such evaluation exercises vary considerably in terms of philosophy, approach and scale across the sector. Section 2 provides three examples of evaluation processes currently in use. These range from annual reports by heads of departments, to internal reviews across whole institutions, to external peer review exercises. The three examples cover all of the relevant issues and range from relatively minor to major exercises in terms of time, effort and money involved.

In contrast to the majority of universities that conduct regular reviews of academic teaching units, only a handful of institutions are known to apply similar evaluation techniques to support services and administrative divisions. One typical case is presented briefly. As noted earlier, reviews of departments can serve more than one purpose. While internal review exercises are generally conducted with a ‘self-improvement’ purpose, recommendations in respect of ‘improvement’ may be related to issues other than quality per se.

Reviews often lead to decisions in respect of the offering of academic programmes and the allocation of resources to departments which are integral to academic planning. In this chapter the focus is on QA, but the QA practitioner should not forget the
multiple purposes to which review exercises can be put. The QA practitioner should cooperate with colleagues from other divisions whenever possible in order to minimise disruptions to academic departments, an action which is always welcomed by those under review.

Self-evaluation (SE) by the units under review is at the heart of all evaluation processes and is without doubt the most effective QA procedure in existence. Its effectiveness as a process reflects the inherent psychology of the approach, and this is examined briefly before several examples of SE exercises are described in Section 3. Again, the main focus is on academic units but SE can be applied with good effect in support and service departments and a relevant current example is described.

2. Planning Evaluation

Academic units

The prime focus in respect of evaluation exercises is understandably on academic teaching units given that these are the delivery points of most educational and research programmes. At its simplest, such an evaluation can take the form of regular (usually annual) reports from Heads of departments and schools to the relevant faculty and on to Senate and Council.

‘Light touch’ regular reporting

At one institution, the annual report from Heads of departments is “meant to be narrative in style…it should highlight certain developments such as progress in meeting goals, outstanding problem areas, noticeable trends…”. University documentation in this case notes that the process of drafting reports would be a good reflective and self-evaluative tool for departments themselves. Heads are given a set of sub-headings as a guideline for their reports and are requested to adapt these to suit the activities of their department as they see fit. With respect to each heading the Head is asked to identify the achievements, opportunities, difficulties and threats that have arisen during the past year. The headings are:

- The departments contribution to the faculty
- Student profile – includes significant demographic change
- Student-lecturer ratio
- Student success rates
- Staff complement – include cv’s
- Teaching and learning activities/innovations
- Staff development and research activities
- Professional activities and services outside university
- General and academic administration
- Infrastructure, building space and equipment
- Departmental plans
- External examiners
Visiting academics
Collaborative academic projects
International linkages and related activities
Conferences and events hosted.

Individual departmental reports are then collated by the Dean and sent to Senate with the Dean’s comments appended. In particular, the Dean is expected to comment on “issues relating to the integration of the department within the faculty or its collaboration with other departments in the faculty”. Such an exercise has a light touch, involves minimal effort on behalf of the QA office, and gains most of the benefits of self-evaluation outlined in the following section.

The above exercise is a valuable start to the process of evaluation although it lacks a specific direction or focus in terms of quality assurance.

**Formal cyclical reviews**

By contrast, a majority of institutions have set up formal cyclical review processes. The smaller institutions find that they can review all academic departments in one year and tend to do this on a three-year cycle. Larger, multi-campus universities usually work on a faculty basis, doing one or two faculties each year and ensuring that each is visited on a five-year cycle. Clearly, timeframes must be adapted to the nature of the institution but the overall evaluation processes are markedly similar across the university sector.

The formal evaluation process consists of three main elements:

1. First an internal process of self-evaluation normally involving the preparation of a self-evaluation report;
2. Validation of the SE report by a committee/panel external to the department; and
3. Follow up in terms of institutional reporting and the implementation of an action plan.

At the outset, the ‘purpose’ of the evaluation should be clearly stated. A distinction needs to be drawn between an internal process focussed on improvement and evaluations that are primarily motivated by the external demands of accrediting or auditing agencies which place an emphasis on accountability. As Oosthuizen (2001: 4) points out, “It is important to stress that the evaluation is being undertaken as an internally driven and improvement orientated process”. If staff feel that the process is connected to external validation by professional boards or an external agency such as the HEQC, the levels of self criticism, so essential to effective self-evaluation, will be muted and the value of the evaluation exercise will be reduced.

Notwithstanding these comments, the wise QA manager builds into review exercises queries which are anticipated in respect of external reviews. Once the details of the HEQC’s audit visits are available it is likely that internal evaluations will become more multi-purpose.

Once the overall purpose of a review has been established, a clear understanding of more specific goals or objectives is required. Typically, these might consist of two sets at departmental and faculty level although a third, institutional level of objectives, might be explicitly stated.
At **departmental level** objectives would include:

- Assess the quality of the department’s educational, research and community programmes in the light of the faculty’s/university’s strategic plan and in terms of departmental mission and vision statements;
- Assess the coherence of the educational experience that is offered to students in their study programmes;
- Assess the effectiveness of departmental systems for managing the quality of departmental activities;
- Assess the appropriateness of the department’s mission statement and strategic plan in relation to those of the university; and
- Incorporate the findings of the evaluation into a realistic strategy for continuous quality improvement.

At **faculty level** the objectives would include:

- Assess the extent to which faculty provides an enabling environment in which its departments can thrive;
- Assess faculty strategies for student support and make recommendations for improvements;
- Determine priorities for educational programmes and resource allocation;
- Assess the quality of research; and
- Assess the effectiveness of staffing strategies.

In setting up an evaluation process, the roles and responsibilities of the main players must be clearly set out and consultation is essential to the design of the evaluation process. Typically the QA staff undertake responsibility for:

- Planning and co-ordination of the entire evaluation exercise;
- Collection of all relevant background documentation;
- The generation of appropriate data and trend analyses;
- Advising departments on the preparation of SE reports;
- The co-ordination of the validation/peer review exercise; and
- Facilitation of the improvement processes that are approved.

Faculty responsibilities vary considerably across the university sector but typically include:

- Assisting in the design and organisation of the evaluation process;
- Assisting departments with the preparation of SE reports;
- Playing a role on peer review committees; and
- The preparation of action plans following evaluation exercises.

Departments play their major role in respect of the self-evaluation reports which are dealt with in some detail in the following section.
The setting of timeframes for evaluation exercises – as well as a detailed sequencing of events/committee meetings – is also vitally important. From the first consultation with the various role players through to data collection, the writing of SE reports, collation of these at faculty level, to the validation exercises which often involve external assessors, to final report writing and decision making, a period of 6 to 12 months is common.

Early decisions are also required on the scope of the evaluation exercise and the level at which it is to function. The focus is usually on departments but may be on larger academic units such as schools or faculties. Most institutions focus on four main themes established by the HEQC as areas of high priority:

- Relevant management systems
- Educational programmes
- Research programmes
- Community service – in particular how this is integrated with academic activities.

The manner in which these four areas of focus are taken up in self-evaluation reports is described in the following section.

One further responsibility of the QA staff in the setting up of an evaluation exercise is making available the necessary statistical data. Conventionally this would include data on staff, students and finances and the statistics would enable each department to assess its position relative to other departments in the same faculty and across the university. At least one institution has produced its own statistical digest for some years as a management and planning tool, and this obviates the necessity for drawing up numerical data for specific planning or quality exercises. Apart from actual numbers of students, various performance indicators may be produced for comparative purposes. Examples of these would be student/staff ratios, pass rates for students according to several variables, the quality of student entrants to first year courses, teaching workloads and research outputs of staff, and proportions of postgraduate students.

On the financial side, the costs per student per annum per department and the costs of graduates make interesting reading across both faculties and the whole university. In most institutions, evaluation exercises call on departments to comment on departmental statistics which differ significantly from faculty or university norms. Relevant preparatory documentation normally includes feedback from student (and sometimes staff) surveys, and possibly also from external stakeholders such as employers and alumni.

As a variation on the above example of an evaluation process, some institutions place a particular emphasis on the nature of the validation exercise. Commonly, peer review groups are internal to the university with perhaps one relevant external subject specialist per review panel. Clearly the inclusion of external assessors has significant cost implications apart from the difficulty of finding suitable people who can afford the time away from their normal duties.
Notwithstanding these constraints, some institutions use only external assessors to validate self-assessment documents produced by academic units. In such cases the visiting peer review team visits the university for two to three days after having studied all relevant documents in advance. Such panels, being external to the institution, require carefully prepared terms of reference if best use is to be made of their time, and if their written report is to fit the needs of the faculty or university.

**Administrative units**

The evaluative processes applied to academic units as described above are equally applicable to administrative and support divisions of a university, although very few institutions have done this to date. There is however a growing concern among academic staff that quality review processes are becoming a tool in the hands of managers and administrators: that quality reviews aimed at improvement often result in decisions aimed at greater efficiencies and increased effectiveness and that this results in greater pressures on academic staff.

Quite justifiably the academic staff are asking when such approaches are to be applied to what they perceive as bloated administrations. When are university administrations going to become more cost effective and more responsive to their internal customers? Apart from the intrinsic value of conducting evaluation exercises on administrative divisions and support services of the university, it is hard to justify applying these to academic units only, and all universities can soon be expected to conduct evaluations right across their institutions.

One university, which conducts regular reviews of its administrative divisions has this to say in its documentation prepared for administrative reviews.

“In its mission statement the university commits itself to strive for excellence and promote quality assurance in all its activities. In support of this commitment and as part of the university’s quality management system, regular reviews of academic and administrative divisions are undertaken.”

The review is seen as an opportunity for all administrative divisions to reflect on their current operations and identify the needs they have in terms of resources, systems and processes. Each department produces a self-evaluation report that is discussed with a review committee before recommendations are submitted to university management and Council. The process also allows for input from any section of the university community and the review committee is representative of all major interest groups on campus including Council, students and representatives of staff unions. The review committee includes one external person, with top level experience of university management.

reviews of all divisions are part of a quality management system
The objectives of the review are set out as follows:

- Review the strategic purpose of each division in relation to the vision and mission of the university;
- Examine the structures and systems of the administrative divisions and how each contributes to the objectives of the university;
- Assess the staff profile in terms of race, gender, years of relevant experience and service, commitment to the division and the university;
- Compare the skills needed to be effective and efficient with the existing skills available; where a gap exists between need and availability the implications for staff development need to be assessed;
- Examine the management of the division – management style, communication within the division, adherence to policy and the nature and extent of disciplinary action;
- Assess working relationships and communication with other administrative divisions and academic departments;
- Assess the necessary resources (staff, equipment and time) needed to realise the strategy of the division; and
- Assess barriers (internal and external) to maximising the effectiveness and efficiency of the division.

The relevant instructions in respect of the preparation of self-evaluation reports are described in the following section.

In summary, evaluation processes are the key to effective quality assurance within the university. The details of the process and the issues on which it focuses must be tailored to each institution’s needs. The common factors are the need for explicit statements of purpose and careful planning and organisation of the entire process. These should be the first issues for consultation between the main role players each of whom should be aware of their duties and responsibilities. The key elements of the process are the self-evaluation reports, their validation by a review committee and the subsequent development of action plans which are properly reported within the university.

3. Self-evaluation

As noted earlier, most universities in South Africa have established cyclical evaluation processes which are integral to quality assurance, and as Oosthuizen (2001) has stated “the heart of the process is the self-evaluation”. SE may be applied at various levels, from department and school to faculty or even (in the case of review by an external agency) at the institutional level. One university has drawn up a comprehensive manual for SE which focuses on three ‘levels’; in academic departments, support and service departments and at the level of the whole institution. At another university SE is applied at department and faculty level only. Whatever the level of application of SE, it has proven to be a most effective way of assessing the state of an institution or its constituent parts.
Stephenson (2001) comments as follows:

“The manner in which the evaluation process is undertaken is critical... An external review group may be seen as a threat by those being reviewed and will often be met by resistance. In contrast, self-evaluation allows those most affected to put forward their own views and propose their own solutions which are likely to be far more enthusiastically accepted than solutions imposed from above.”

If a university wants to know what is going on in a department, how effective and efficient it is, how it rates in the quality stakes, there are really only three possible approaches: ask the staff of the department or ask its students or call in an external group to conduct a review.

While it is generally accepted that student opinion should be tested, this sort of input has limited value and clearly most students are not in the position to comment on most of the activities of an academic department. Sending in an external review group is a top down approach which creates a ‘them and us’ situation. It immediately puts the departmental staff on the defensive and in a reactionary mode. In this situation most staff will do their best to maximise strengths and gloss over weaknesses and to ‘play the rules of the game’ to best advantage. Faced with an external review group, departmental staff close ranks in defence. This creates a situation which stifles debate between departmental staff and inhibits innovation.

Decades of experience have demonstrated that self-evaluation is the evaluative process most likely to produce good results. The psychology of ‘doing it to ourselves rather than having them do it to us’ is what makes the difference. Department staff will still maximise strengths but when faced with weaknesses really only have two options: either to be honest about them or to hide them. The latter course of action lays staff open to ridicule when their report is subject to peer review and in any event it is unlikely that a departmental weakness is not known outside the department. In practice, staff rarely attempt to hide weak points. The approach most in their interests is to demonstrate a knowledge and understanding of weak points; to be able to explain and possibly justify the situation, and to show that they are capable of proposing realistic solutions. Staff are aware that the solutions they propose are the ones most likely to be supported by university management. University managers in turn, are aware that departmental staff will put extraordinary effort into making their own solutions work. Imposed solutions at best receive lacklustre support and may even be ‘white-anted’.

The most effective approach to SE at departmental level is a letter from the QA manager requesting a head of department to conduct a SE exercise and write a report. The purpose and scope of the exercise should be made clear, although in most institutions the decision to conduct an evaluation is approved at Senate where the unit of analysis (department/school/faculty), purpose (perhaps strategic planning and QA), and scope (range of issues to be covered) are also agreed on.

The choice of the unit of analysis is critically important and must relate to the set purposes of the review, the organisational structure of the institution and uses to which the SE reports will be put. In one university SE by academic departments is the appropriate way to go, in another it may be
larger units such as schools and a strong argument can be made for working simultaneously at both institutional level and at faculty level. Again it is a matter of review purposes and institutional culture, and the QA manager has the responsibility of planning SE exercises in close cooperation with other senior managers in the university.

The letter requesting a SE report normally allows a high degree of freedom to departmental staff in terms of the content of the report, while at the same time requiring a response on certain key issues. In this way departmental staff have a greater sense of ‘owning’ the report and being able to tailor it to the needs of their department. Reports from different departments may therefore be quite different documents but all reports will deal with certain core issues.

An example of the core issues which academic departments at one university were asked to address in 2000 are set out below:

- The departmental mission statement, noting any changes since the previous review and how it relates to the university mission;
- A list of all academic staff noting main areas of teaching responsibility and research interests;
- An evaluation of all educational programmes offered, particularly where student numbers are low;
- Description of current research activities and postgraduate students;
- Brief summary of community service activities of department;
- Comment on resources available to department (facilities, equipment, library holdings etc);
- Concise academic plan for next 3 to 5 years, noting specifically any new academic initiatives or programmes to be discontinued;
- Comment on the statistical data provided – where costs exceed income suggestions on how to deal with the situation are requested;
- A list of quality assurance procedures in place in respect of academic and management functions of department; and
- Any other comment or documentation which is considered relevant to the review.

The data provided to departments in this case included full-time equivalent students (under- and post graduate) for the department, faculty and university, staff student ratios for all departments, departmental profit or loss statements, subsidy income and costs per FTE student in the department, departmental costs per student for all departments and examination results.

there are generally agreed upon characteristics of effective self-evaluation
For those QA practitioners thinking of setting up a SE exercise, a set of generally agreed on characteristics of effective SE can be summarised as follows:

- clarity of purpose;
- clearly defined scope;
- legitimacy of peer review groups;
- well organised and scheduled process;
- effective follow-up and feedback;
- adequate time allocated to each stage of the process;
- good supporting documentation and statistical data, recognising the relative nature of measures used;
- departments asked to respond to a set of points but given freedom to adapt these to the departmental situation as they see fit;
- departments allowed to set their own goals against which they will be evaluated;
- process should include all affected parties within department: academics, technical and clerical staff and students, especially postgraduates;
- transparency should be more than a good intention – data about departments should be widely available;
- participants encouraged to think creatively – solutions being most effective when emanating from the people most affected;
- diversity should be acknowledged and catered for; and
- good practice should be rewarded and shared.

Most of the desirable characteristics of SE exercises listed above relate equally well when management and support divisions of a university are being evaluated. Clearly the scope will differ and the following list of items to be covered in the SE reports of administrative managers at a South African university in 2002 are listed to illustrate the somewhat different approach outside the academic arena:

- What is the purpose (mission) of the division? How is this aligned with the strategic direction of the university?
- Explain the sub-divisions and reporting structure of the division.
- Who are your customers? Comment on the effectiveness and efficiency of services offered.
- Are any customer feedback mechanisms in place?
- Comment on work practices, policies and procedures used to ensure the efficient completion of work.
- How is accountability defined and evaluated?
- What staff development initiatives are in place?
- How are staff performance problems detected and dealt with?
- What policies and procedures are in place to ensure the accuracy of financial records and the security of all assets?
- How does the division monitor and evaluate its own activities?
- Comment on the staff profile. How are gaps between skills needed and skills available dealt with? Do all staff understand the division’s mission?
- Comment on communication and collaboration with other divisions
- What are the priorities for the division over the next 3 to 5 years?
Key points

1. Evaluation exercises are the key to effective quality assurance.

2. The purpose of an evaluation exercise should be clearly stated - normally an internally driven, improvement orientated exercise.

3. An evaluation exercise should be carefully tailored to fit the nature and scale of the unit being evaluated.

4. Self-evaluation is central to all evaluation processes and is the most effective quality assurance procedure.

5. Self-evaluation reports should be validated by a peer review committee.

6. Final evaluation reports and subsequent action plans should be fully reported within the university.

7. Staff are aware that the solutions they propose are the ones most likely to be supported by management. University managers, in turn, are aware that departmental staff will put extraordinary effort into making their own solutions work.
Chapter 8

Priorities for Tomorrow

The SNQAF has identified several areas in which much work remains to be done in respect of quality assurance. Three of these areas are addressed here. Quality assurance in and of research is currently under active consideration and the situation is outlined. Secondly, we consider support programmes for staff in respect of T&L along with more general staff development and training. These are priority areas for the HEQC. Finally a topic of growing importance is described - internationalisation and quality assurance.

1. Introduction

Quality assurance priorities within South African universities currently reflect an emphasis on Teaching and Learning, and on Evaluation and Self-Evaluation as evidenced in the preceding chapters. There can be little doubt that these are the correct starting points for QA practitioners.

The SNQAF workshop of November 2001 identified several other areas in which a start has been made on quality assurance, but in which much remains to be done. For example, the application of evaluation processes to administrative and service departments of universities is being done by only a few institutions at present. This situation is hard to justify, and given the anticipated focus of the HEQC on T&L and the relevant support services, is expected to change rapidly during 2002.

This chapter deals with quality assurance in three areas described as ‘priorities for tomorrow’ – always bearing in mind that ‘tomorrow’ means the immediate future. Foremost of these topics is quality in research which has been identified by the HEQC as a priority area.

Also of specific interest to the HEQC is the quality of staff development and staff support which is essential to enable staff to fulfil their roles to the best of their abilities. As noted in an earlier section, one of the critical questions in the evaluation of departments relates to skills needed versus ‘skills on hand’ and
how any shortfall is to be handled. There is an increasing emphasis on effectiveness and efficiency in the workplace and this places ever greater demands on staff – especially academic staff. Universities cannot expect their staff to raise performance levels without offering appropriate skills development opportunities. The quality of these development and support mechanisms which relate directly to the quality of T&L and the whole student experience of a university is therefore a priority for tomorrow.

The third priority area dealt with in this chapter is that of internationalisation and QA. Increasingly universities are being called on to demonstrate their levels of international comparability and the extent to which they prepare their students to work in the international arena. External QA agencies themselves, linked to an international network of such agencies, are adopting international benchmarks, performance indicators and procedures in evaluating universities. Students, the main customers, are asking about the international acceptability, transportability and comparability of their qualifications. A student in the 21st century is a world citizen whose first job may well be on another continent.

Equally, increasing interest is being shown by international students in study at South African universities and the proportion of such students is growing steadily. Some universities already derive significant income from international students. At one institution the level of international students already exceeds 20% and such a trend requires close attention to international issues. International students are concerned that credits gained at a South African university will be accepted by the home institution for degree purposes, and this is leading to a new focus on internationalisation and quality assurance in the university sector.

Clearly, there are several other topics which can fall under the heading of ‘priorities for tomorrow’ but the three that follow, quality in research, staff development and support, and internationalisation and QA, are considered to be of the highest priority at this stage.

2. Quality Assurance in Research

It is widely accepted that the core business of a university is teaching and research and, despite the recent emphasis on T&L, research has traditionally been given the higher priority. Academics have more often than not been appointed on the basis of their qualifications and published research and to this day, a good researcher carries more weight than a good teacher in most institutions. The status of researchers has depended largely on the number of their publications and their standing within a discipline. Only recently has attention been paid to the quality and value of their work. Quality assurance of research is a relatively new area of concern and certainly one in which much remains to be done.

Most South African universities have given a high priority to the promotion and management of research and it is common practice for a senior manager such as a deputy vice-chancellor or Dean of Research to chair a Senate standing committee on research. Typically such a committee would:
Receive applications for and allocate university research funds;
Recommend, on behalf of the university, all applications to statutory research councils such as the NRF and MRC;
Develop a code of ethics for researchers and give ethical approval to research protocols; and
Advise the Senate on research policy.

In some institutions, the Research committee may have sub-committees which are faculty based or which relate to broad study areas such as human sciences, natural sciences and health sciences.

The office of the Director or Dean of Research is normally responsible for the day-to-day management and promotion of research activities. Quality assurance of research such as it is, is normally also the responsibility the Research Committee and relevant research manager and the QA office has no direct involvement. This situation is satisfactory as long as the responsibility for QA in the research area is clearly understood. Most research offices provide a service to academic staff in making them aware of the possibilities for research funding and assisting with applications for research. A ‘higher degrees guide’ is usually available to post-graduate students and typically it would include:

- The higher degrees available and the entry requirements;
- The processes involved in being accepted for and registering for a higher degree;
- Preparing research proposals;
- University rules relating to higher degrees;
- Research resources available;
- The university policy on supervisory practice (if there is one);
- The responsibilities of higher degree candidates before starting a project, during a project and at the conclusion of a research project;
- Styles for theses;
- Examination procedures; and
- Publication of research findings.

All of the above relate to the management of research and there is no doubt that many institutions offer a high quality of service in this respect to their academic staff and post-graduate students. At the time of writing, efforts were being made to form a research management association in South Africa which would include the higher education sector and other institutions concerned with research management. However, given that the HEQC spotlight is to fall on the quality of research it is worth enquiring what this might entail. Suggestions include:

most universities give high priority to
the promotion and management of research
The quality of management systems in research;
The evaluation of researchers – their standing within a discipline;
The evaluation of research proposals, projects and output;
The extent to which research programmes develop capacity – human resources;
The extent to which resources are mobilised to contribute to the quality of life of people in South Africa; and
The extent to which research programmes strive for excellence.

The evaluation of researchers and their output is very much a matter of peer review. To date no other forms of assessment have been devised. It is interesting to note that the National Research Foundation (NRF), which has long had a rating system for researchers in the natural and health sciences, is developing a rating system for human scientists. This system has yet to be finalised but is likely to rest heavily on peer review. Current proposals suggest that there may be eight reviewers of an individual researcher, half of whom would be drawn from a list provided by the person under review. Guidelines for reviewers have still to be drawn up but the following issues will have to be taken into account:

- The individual’s standing in a field of study;
- The impact of the work done;
- The impact factor of the journal/s in which research is published;
- Some good researchers have a poor output;
- The volume of output does not reflect quality or value of output;
- Output in the dramatic and performing arts cannot be assessed in the same manner as that in more formal disciplines; and
- Notions of quality, value and relevance of research are context derived. Until the research community can more clearly define these characteristics of research, it will be very difficult and perhaps unfair to use these as criteria for rating researchers.

As noted at the outset, the formal assuring of quality in research is in its infancy. The concern for quality has always been there and higher degrees and research committees have done much to ensure that research proposals are viable, that the necessary resources and supervision have been available, and that examination committees and external examiners have performed as asked. Nevertheless, much remains to be done and much is likely to be achieved in this area of quality assurance in the next few years.

quality assurance of research is a relatively new area of concern
3. Staff Development and Staff Support

Once quality assurance is working well in key areas such as in T&L and in the review of academic departments, it will need to incorporate the full range of administrative divisions which provide the support and services essential to those personnel who are engaged in the core business of teaching, research and community service. Ideally a parallel implementation strategy should exist but in most institutions academic units have received attention first.

The first divisions on which the spotlight is likely to fall are those concerned with academic staff development and the provision of the requisite support services. Ultimately the people engaged in more peripheral activities such as those who register students, and process student results will need to be assessed in terms of the quality of service they offer but in the short term the focus will be on the development and support of academic staff. The HEQC, which has identified T&L as one of its priority areas, has also stated clearly that it is concerned to assess the policies and mechanisms in place which enable university educators effectively to implement T&L policy. In short, there is no sense in placing new demands on academic staff in terms of T&L policies if the requisite staff training and support mechanisms are not in place.

In most of the South African universities, academic staff development and support mechanisms are provided by Human Resources Divisions and Academic Development Centres (ADC’s). The terminology may vary from one institution to another but it is vital that all divisions responsible for offering such services act in concert in order to avoid an overlap in their activities or, even worse, the omission of an essential service.

**Academic Development Centres**

Traditionally, perhaps a decade ago, ADC’s focussed their efforts on student support and their activities were characterised by ‘add-on’ short courses aimed at increasing student skills levels so that they could benefit fully from full-time mainstream academic courses. The mainstream teaching staff were in the habit of sending weak students to the ADC for assistance and, in so doing, were casting aside the problems increasingly faced in the lecture room as the proportion of academically under-prepared students grew. ADC activities were always staff intensive and therefore expensive on a per student basis and the logistics became impossible as the proportion of the student body needing assistance continued to grow.

The combination of increasing costs and a growing awareness of some of the shortcomings of add-on courses for weaker students led to a change in emphasis in ADC activities – from a student focus to a staff focus and from individual lecturers to teaching teams. The wisdom of training the teacher rather than the student won through. At the same time universities had to call on all their teaching staff to assume responsibility for the quality of their teaching and the quality of the learning experiences that they offered their students.
The new focus on teaching and learning is described in Chapter 6 and there is no need here to reiterate the range of policies and procedures which now form part of good practice in T&L. Suffice it to say that universities cannot expect their staff effectively to implement these policies without offering them the opportunity to gain the requisite knowledge and skills and without providing them with the essential backup and support.

Certainly the activities which characterise a present-day, good quality ADC differ considerably from those of five years ago. Most of their work now is in running workshops for groups of staff to inform them on good practice in T&L and how relevant policy may be implemented. Some workshops are thematic, perhaps on curriculum design and review, and are open to any staff. Others are department specific and reports from several universities suggest that these are the most effective. When staff in a department have the opportunity to work together within the context of a specific discipline, they are most likely to succeed in offering excellence at the T&L interface. It is easier for them to understand and implement policy when assisted by professional ADC staff within a departmental and/or discipline based context.

One of the more valuable activities of ADC’s has been in assisting academic staff to build teaching portfolios. Such portfolios are a form of self-evaluation by a university teacher in which s/he describes and explains the approaches to teaching that are used and explains why these amount to good practice in a given context. Teaching portfolios encourage the ‘reflective practitioner’ and are always works-in-progress. Increasingly academic staff are taking pride in the production of a teaching portfolio which has already become an important element in the curriculum vita of a present-day academic.

Some universities require that portfolios be assessed by a peer review committee as part of the promotion process or the confirmation of probationary positions. Support from ADC staff can come in several other forms. For example, several institutions assist academic staff with the organising of student evaluations of courses, and several universities are known to have invested in equipment that scans completed sets of questionnaires and produces statistical analyses of these.

In some universities, the range of training workshops being offered by the ADC has reached the stage at which these can be followed in a sequence which leads to a qualification for university educators. As mentioned earlier, it is interesting to note that in the United Kingdom it is expected that new entrants to university teaching will soon be required to possess a higher education qualification before being appointed to the permanent staff of a university. Currently work is being done in South Africa to take the Post-Graduate Certificate in Higher Education offered at one university and turn it into a national qualification.
Human Resource Divisions

At most universities the Personnel Divisions of ten years ago have become the Human Resources (HR) Divisions of today. This is more than a change in nomenclature. It reflects a growing concern on the part of good employers that they are responsible for more than the administration of employee affairs. The good employer recognises that each employee is a valuable resource to be nurtured and developed. Employers are also aware that it is in their interests that staff are happy in the workplace, feel that they are appreciated and possess appropriate skills.

South African employers have to work within a complex framework of labour legislation which clearly sets out the obligations of employers. The Skills Act and the Employment Equity Act also place demands on Human Resources divisions which are required to have the relevant policy in place, and to have actions plans which are reported to government and are freely available to employees. As a result of the above changes in approach, and the new legislation, HR departments are developing a range of policies and mechanism to enable staff to gain further skills and qualifications and to fully develop themselves as individuals.

It is common practice today for universities to offer funding for staff to improve qualifications and to attend courses of training or relevant conferences. In addition to skills development, a range of training seminars are arranged in-house so that staff are better able to perform the tasks set them. For academic staff there are usually induction courses for new staff to familiarise them with their new environment and how it functions and brochures which inform them how to go about accessing the wide range of services and facilities on campus. A variety of workshops are made available during the year, such as one for new Heads of departments, to help staff understand what is expected of them, and what resources are available to assist them.

To a large extent staff support from HR divisions has depended on individual staff requesting assistance but this situation is changing. Several universities have established Staff Development Committees – even if these only relate to academic staff in the first instance – which take a pro-active stance in the development of human resources. Some institutions have introduced staff appraisal systems which, given a developmental approach, and operated at the departmental level, can play a valuable role in HR development.

In summary, there is a considerable range of activities in the modern university aimed at raising the skills levels of staff and providing them with the infra-structural support so necessary if they are to be able to meet the challenges which face them in the workplace. These are the activities which lay the foundation for success in the core business of the university – the activities to which quality assurance practitioners must pay attention in order to demonstrate that the pre-conditions exist for success of their T&L policies.
4. Internationalisation and Quality Assurance

Introduction

“During the last two decades of the 20th century, internationalisation and quality assurance have developed into systematic characteristics of higher education. In spite of their simultaneous evolution however, actual links between the two phenomena occurred only recently” (van der Wende & Westerheijden, 2001).

Internationalisation has long claimed to contribute to the quality of HE but has produced little evidence to this effect and, until recently, there were no measures to assure the quality of international activities in HE. At the same time, QA developed structures for international cooperation but did not directly address the internationalisation dimension of HE. To a large extent this situation resulted from the national focus of QA agencies and the fact that internationalisation, in its early stages, related largely to the mobility of students and staff. This situation has now completely changed and internationalisation and quality issues are increasingly integrated. This section thus briefly examines both the need for the quality assurance of internationalisation and the internationalisation of quality assurance. The extent to which these apparently distinct topics are close to convergence is also examined.

Internationalisation

“In the pursuit of their core tasks of extending the limits of knowledge through research, and of providing high level tuition for future generations of leaders and decision-makers, universities have always been international in nature. However, in recent years, internationalisation has increased dramatically, both in teaching and research. An international dimension has become one of the key criteria for quality in higher education...”(Davies et al., 2001: 5).

In South Africa there is a new awareness of the need to consider internationalisation issues. One of the country’s largest and long established universities recently undertook an evaluation of its academic evaluation system and in a series of self-critical comments, Botha (2000: 9) notes that, “Internationalisation is not currently included as an evaluation criterion for the programmes offered by departments”. A recent press article dwelt on the need for the international competitiveness of South African graduates while the advertising for one of the country’s largest universities now has the banner headline, “An international choice”. There can be no doubt that South African universities are rapidly becoming aware of the importance of internationalisation within HE.

The growth of internationalisation has become a widespread and strategically important phenomenon in HE. It includes a wide range of activities such as the internationalisation of curricula, the cross border delivery of education, the establishment of international consortia and the substantial import and export of HE products and services. Knight (1994) defined the internationalisation of HE as

“the process of integrating an international/intercultural dimension into the teaching, research and service functions of the institution”.

Chapter 8 • Priorities for Tomorrow
Factors leading to the growth of internationalisation include the following:

- A growing demand for HE in countries without an adequate HE infrastructure which are perceived by external providers as potential markets;
- A decrease in public funding for HE in some countries which motivates HEI’s to seek foreign markets;
- Liberalisation of the international market in HE;
- Growing international competition for students and the increasing mobility of people;
- Growing demand on the part of students for an education which is of ‘international standard’ and that is ‘recognised’ internationally;
- Developments in information technology which have facilitated the emergence of new forms of HE provision and new forms of HE providers;
- The identification of competencies considered essential if graduates are to function in the international work environment;
- Increasing recognition at national level of the links between the internationalisation of the HE sector and the economic and technological development of a country;
- The increased international networking of national QA agencies;
- International agreements such as the Bologna Declaration; and
- Government policy which regards HE as a valuable export commodity.

In countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia, education and training services rank among the top five exports. Policy statements from the United States Department of Commerce, the Industry Commission in Australia and the Department of Trade and Industry in the United Kingdom underline this fact. As Elliot (1998: 32) comments,

“Internationalisation in the UK can be summarised as the mobilisation of the skilled human resources needed to make the UK a more internationally competitive trading nation and to maximise export earnings by selling education services to paying customers”.

Trans-national education used to be seen as ‘development assistance’, usually part of a cultural programme. Today it is clearly an export commodity.

The rapid pace of development of internationalisation strategies has brought with it some serious problems, most of which relate to regulation, quality assurance and recognition. As Davies et al. (2000: 235) point out, for example, “in 51% of the trans-national educational programmes offered by Australian institutions no external responsibility (assessment) for the quality of programmes exists”. Complaints from countries which import education are common, particularly when domestic institutions exceed national regulatory boundaries.

In recent years several cases have been exposed where the quality of the foreign operations of a university has been substantially lower than the domestic standards. As van der Wende & Westerheijden (2001) note, “the fact that higher education is internationalising at such speed and size, while quality assurance systems and responsibilities are still largely based at the national level, creates major tensions and challenges”. Clearly, quality assurance is key to the success of internationalisation strategies.
The implementation of internationalisation strategies within universities is a major topic and not relevant to this report. Those interested are directed to an IMHE publication of 1999, *Quality and Internationalisation in Higher Education*, edited by Knight & de Wit. In the opening chapter, Knight proposes programme and organisational strategies for integrating an international dimension into the teaching, research and service functions of an HE institution. She proposes 33 programme strategies grouped under four broad categories:

- Academic programmes;
- Research and scholarly collaboration;
- External relations and services – domestic and abroad; and
- Extra-curricular activities.

She further proposes 16 organisational strategies also in four categories:

- Governance
- Operations
- Support services
- Human resource development

**Quality assurance in the international domain**

As pointed out elsewhere, there is

"a growing need for higher education institutions to be served by quality assurance agencies which are independent, professional and which can function across national boundaries... Institutions that export education and graduates who move about the globe require assurance about the international acceptability of their qualifications" (Smout 1999: 1).

The internationalisation of quality assurance has proceeded apace in the last decade. The United States, the United Kingdom and Australia were the first to develop ‘codes of good practice’ in the early 1990s setting out minimum standards in practices related to student mobility, overseas recruitment and the cross border delivery of programmes and services. By contrast, in Finland and the Netherlands self-evaluation and assessment instruments were developed which encouraged HE institutions to review the quality of their strategies on international curricula, teaching and learning processes, joint degrees and services for international students. This approach meant that HE institutions evaluated their efforts and achievements against their own stated objectives with the aim of improving the quality of their internationalisation activities.

In 1994 the Internationalisation Quality Review Project was launched by the Programme on Institutional Management of the OECD in co-operation with the Academic Co-operation Association (ACA) in Europe. After an experimental period which included pilot reviews in institutions around the world, the project was further developed and institutionalised in co-operation with the European University Association (EUA), and is now offered as a joint service by the three organisations.
The Internationalisation Quality Review (IQR) is a quality assurance tool which combines strategic management aspects with internationalisation, and its main purpose is quality improvement through an assessment of an institution’s achievements when measured against its own goals and objectives for internationalisation. One South African university has undergone an IQR to date and several others are known to be considering similar action. Other institutions have chosen different routes in seeking some form of international review or accreditation. Clearly the value of such action is being recognised.

In the area of trans-national education, UNESCO and the Council of Europe have developed a code of good practice which works to bring together the quality framework of both the sending country and the receiving country. One of the few examples of a national QA agency moving into the international field is that of the Quality Assurance Agency of the United Kingdom. It has developed a Code of Practice for Overseas Collaborative Provision in HE for UK universities. The QAA has also developed a code for distance education and the New Zealand Academic Audit Unit has developed a model for the external quality assurance for virtual HE institutions. Several countries including Malaysia, Romania and South Africa have introduced legislation which requires foreign providers of HE to be registered or licensed in some way by national QA agencies, or by the Ministry of Education. The International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) has facilitated the exchange of ideas among national QA agencies which has accelerated the internationalisation of QA. INQAAHE is currently focussing on the alignment of qualification frameworks in different countries and the quality and recognition of imported courses.

To date QA has functioned primarily at institutional and national levels. Trans-national QA has for the most part related to the trans-national activities of domestic universities. Rarely do national QA agencies operate outside their own countries and then only by invitation. However moves are afoot to meet the increasing demand from HE institutions seeking international review, recognition or accreditation. With the fall of the Iron Curtain in Europe in 1989, the European Union was faced with a demand for recognition from central and eastern European universities. Since then the Association of European Universities has developed its own quality assurance procedures based on institutional audit and this service is now offered to the more than 500 members of the EUA.

More recently, in 1999, the Bologna Declaration has set the tone for internationalisation of quality assurance. Besides the objective of increased mobility and employability of European citizens, the declaration aims to enhance the international competitiveness of the European system of HE. One of its objectives is listed as "Promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance with a view to developing comparable criteria and methodologies" (Bologna Declaration, 1999: 2).

As the emphasis in quality assurance moves away from the national context towards the international domain so do its functions change. Within the context of a single national HE system the emphasis was primarily on quality improvement and accountability. In the international context, these functions remain important but their meanings change. In the international context, accountability is now to the customers (rather than a national government) and consumer protection is the issue. At this point quality assessment becomes a matter of transparency and validation. Within a large and highly diversified HE system, prospective students need much more information about institutions (transparency) and the assurance of at least a minimum level of higher education (some form of validation or accreditation).
To date quality improvement remains the responsibility of institutional management but international benchmarking and voluntary institutional audits by international associations are already on the increase. Major regional QA associations, similar to those within the EU, are likely to be established elsewhere. Ultimately, a truly international QA agency will emerge – one that is willing and able to respond to applications from an HE institution anywhere. The long-term implications of this process for national QA agencies remains to be seen but in all probability they will continue to fulfil national needs. University QA practitioners will then need to operate at three levels:

- At the intra-institutional level in order to lift the quality of the institution to the highest possible levels and be ready for external assessment;
- At the national level in order to be accountable, accredited and funded; and
- At the international level in order to compete successfully in an increasingly competitive international marketplace – to attract students in sufficient numbers and of calibre that will enable the university to thrive.

In summary, internationalisation and quality assurance are imperatives in the modern university. Quality assurance currently strives for international expression while the success of internationalisation strategies is dependent on effective quality assurance. Both topics will attain the highest priority within higher education internationally and South African universities should engage in the forthcoming debate.

**Key points**

1. Assessing the quality of research is a priority for the HEQC.
2. Notions of quality, value and relevance of research are context derived and much work remains to be done in defining these characteristics of research.
3. The NRF is working on a rating system for human scientists.
4. T&L policies place new demands on academic staff and require the establishment of a range of staff training and development opportunities.
5. The HEQC has stated its intention to assess the policies and mechanisms in place which enable university educators effectively to implement T&L policies.
6. Internationalisation may be defined as the process of integrating an international /intercultural dimension into the teaching, research and service functions of an institution.
7. There is a growing need for HEI's to be served by QA agencies which are independent, professional and which can function across national boundaries.
Chapter 9
External Quality Review

We describe reasons for the establishment of external quality assurance agencies around the world and the range of activities carried out by such agencies. The current agenda of the HEQC, particularly in respect of audit visits and programme accreditation, is then outlined.

1. External Quality Assurance Agencies

The 1990s witnessed the establishment of more than 50 national higher education quality assurance agencies in countries around the globe. For the most part such agencies were established by governments but some were answerable to the national HE sector, and others to professional bodies. In some cases of QA agencies linked to professional bodies, areas of responsibility crossed national boundaries.

The factors which led to the rapid and widespread development of national QA agencies are succinctly summed up in the opening paragraph of the Founding Document of the HEQC (2000):

“...The institutionalisation of quality assurance is firmly on the agenda of higher education in a number of developed and developing countries around the world. The demand for greater accountability and efficiency in respect of public financing, trends towards mass participation in the face of shrinking resources, and greater stakeholder scrutiny of education and training processes and outcomes have led to the increasing implementation of formal quality assurance arrangements within higher education institutions and systems”.

Depending on the authority to which a QA agency is responsible and the reasons for setting up the agency, the purposes of the agency may be any one or more of the following (adapted from Woodhouse, 1998):
Quality improvement – assisting and supporting institutions in their internal QA activities;
Assessing or evaluating the institutions against a set of standards, benchmarks or intended outcomes;
Quality audit – a review of an institutional systems for achieving quality – whether the systems are effective and the extent to which the institution achieves its stated purposes;
Accreditation – a check as to whether an institution is good enough for some specified purpose such as state funding or for its graduates (or qualifications) to be recognised; and
Report publicly in an agreed manner on the actions taken or conclusions reached as a result of an external quality review.

The work of external quality agencies is primarily of interest to governments, employers, professional bodies and HE institutions. HEI’s are at the heart of quality assurance but are not in the position to systematise issues such as standards, comparability between institutions and recognition. The HEI’s need an objective external QA agency to affirm the extent to which institutional goals are being met. Some professional associations work closely with EQA agencies while others maintain their distance. Graduates in professional fields want their qualifications recognised internationally and some professional bodies have achieved more in terms of trans-national accreditation than any group of EQA agencies. The Washington accord between the professional engineering associations is a well-known example of this. Employers, especially multinational organisations, want an assurance that graduates will meet specified norms and they seek consistency of outcomes across institutions.

Governments are in the first instance concerned that a country’s HE system is producing the graduates it needs and that the system is effective and efficient. Some governments are also concerned with the export of education, or that the needs of foreign students are served in domestic institutions so that the assurance of quality, at least to some minimum standards, becomes essential. As noted in the previous chapter, this latter issue is at present of growing concern in Europe.

It is important however that both the EQA agencies and the HE institutions are aware of the dangers of dirigisme. As Woodhouse (1998) notes, “Audit is not neutral. Audits do as much to construct definitions of quality and performance as to monitor them”.

EQA agencies may purposely steer institutions in a particular direction and, if this is the case, the direction and reasons for it should be explicit. For example, in 1994 in the United Kingdom, the HEQC queried institutions during audits as to what they do to set and ensure academic standards. This gave rise to a major project aimed at producing explicit descriptions of the standards that should characterise degree courses and their graduates. This form of sharing good practice can have a major impact on the system especially if it comes in the form of a ‘recommendation’ from a national QA agency which is responsible to government which is usually the major source of university funding. Woodhouse (1998) comments as follows:

“Recommending good practice seems unquestionably a good thing, yet it may tend to homogeneity, becoming the standard practice and deterring further creativity and innovation.”
Dirigisme may also be a consequence of an institution adopting a compliance mentality and being over eager to respond to what is perceived as a requirement of an EQA agency.

Most EQA agencies seek to combine the roles of ‘improvement’ and ‘accountability’ but this is a difficult task at which to succeed. Given that most EQA agencies are set up by government, the balance between improvement and accountability is often determined by the state. In some countries state funding is directly related to quality assessments by EQA agencies and this adds to the tensions involved. It is exceptionally difficult to be both ‘helpful friend’ and ‘policeman’. In some countries quality promotion and auditing are functions carried out by different agencies but most EQA agencies, like the HEQC in South Africa, are left to find a balance between these two conflicting roles.

2. The Higher Education Quality Committee

The development of a national QA system in South Africa has long been viewed as a critical component of the restructuring of HE that is currently underway. Quality was identified as one of the principles that should guide the transformation of HE in South Africa. The Higher Education Act of 1997 made provision for the CHE to establish a permanent sub-committee, the HEQC with a mandate to:

- Promote QA in HE;
- Audit the QA mechanisms of HEI’s; and
- Accredit programmes of HE.

The vision and mission of the HEQC, along with its approach to QA, the scope of its work and an outline of its operational plans are clearly set out in its Founding Document (CHE, 2000) and there is no need to describe these here. It is assumed that all QA practitioners in the country possess a copy of this document and have read it. This brief section sets out to highlight some of the more pertinent issues that have emerged since the formal establishment of the HEQC in May 2001.
In summary, the HEQC:

- Will put in place a framework to support quality provision across a differentiated HE landscape;
- Will focus on and ensure threshold levels of quality for public and private HE providers within a common national framework;
- Supports the view that the primary responsibility for the quality of provision and QA systems rests with the providers;
- Will engage in rigorous external validation through site visits, peer review and use of qualitative and quantitative performance indicators;
- In the early stages will focus on:
  - Management structures and QA systems,
  - The T&L interface and related support structures,
  - The quality of research,
  - The quality of community service;
- Has extended its mandate to include in the short term:
  - A review of post-graduate programmes,
  - Conduct a quality check on distance education programmes of contact HEI’s,
  - Review public/private collaborative agreements;
- Is aware of the need for balance between improvement and accountability and had planned to place the emphasis on development at least in the early stages of its work, however, urgent problems within the HE sector are pushing the accountability agenda;
- Believes that it is only possible to pursue a developmental approach once certain minima are in place – an institution must meet certain conditions (not yet specified) in order to be registered/accredited;
- Proposed in January 2002 a timetable of action as follows:
  - 2002 August to November – visits to HE institutions to discuss QA priorities
  - 2003 Pilot audits
  - 2004 First full audits.

The first visits are expected to:

- Probe how institutions operationalise their mission statements, and use mission statements as benchmarks against which to assess institutions;
- Link the audit to national HE imperatives;
- Assess the extent to which QA is integrated into management practices, academic planning and strategic planning;
- Examine whether pre-conditions for effective teaching and learning are in place, i.e. whether T&L policies and structures are in place and actively managed; and
- Possibly include the programme accreditation of a few pre-selected programmes as a trial exercise.
The HEQC is currently setting up its systems and training people so that the first trial audit visits can take place in 2003. It faces a daunting task. Notwithstanding the current proposals of the National Working Group in respect of institutional mergers, there are presently 36 public HEI’s and approximately 100 private providers of HE programmes to be audited. The HEQC has a small core staff and a limited budget with which to promote quality, conduct institutional audits and accredit programmes across the entire HE sector in South Africa. Fortunately there is considerable expertise in the sector which is highly supportive of the aims of the HEQC and which shares the view that an effective national quality assurance system is critical to the success of a restructured higher education system in South Africa.

An important challenge to the HEQC is to establish a national QA system at a time when major restructuring of the system is underway. As Kotecha & Luckett (2000: 3) point out,

“The new QA system will more easily win credibility and support if it operates post the reconfiguration of the HE system and uses the principles on which the new system is to be based to assist HEI’s in developing their new missions and functions as these will become the criteria for future QA judgments. Reshaped HEI’s with new missions and functions will need to begin a process of serious strategic planning and management which, by definition, should include the development of internal QA systems to assess their fitness for their new purposes.”

3. Preparing for External Quality Review

Several members of the SNQAF have suggested the inclusion in this report of a section on preparing for external quality review. The short, perhaps blunt answer to QA practitioners who ask what they should do to prepare for a visit from the HEQC or other quality review agency, is “read this report and, within the context of your institution, establish structures and devise, implement and monitor policy as recommended”.

If the many ideas and recommendations in this report are applied appropriately, the institution will be in a good position to receive an external peer review team. The main concerns of the HEQC as currently understood are set out in the section above and all of these issues are dealt with in earlier chapters. Issues of policy and structures for QA are dealt with in Chapter 3 while the high priority area of T&L is found in Chapter 6. Once QA managers are aware of the details of audit visits and accreditation procedures, they will be able to adapt many of their internal QA processes so that minimum additional work is generated by an audit visit.

The assessment of quality in research and community service remains work-in-progress. At the time of writing, reference groups set up by the HEQC are looking at both these topics and their recommendations are awaited with interest by QA managers. Some indication of current thinking in respect to quality in research is set out in Chapter 8 (section 2). To date, most references to community service in the context of QA have related to work done by students in training such as in legal aid clinics and by health science graduates in their intern years. It is anticipated that a much broader definition of community service in respect of HEI’s will emerge.
With respect to accreditation of programmes there is also much work still to be done. Currently accreditation is effected via an Interim Joint Committee which approves proposals to offer new HE programmes. In effect programmes are registered by SAQA, approved for offering and funding by the DoE, and accredited by the HEQC. This process is able to impose certain minimum standards in terms of appropriate staffing, availability of facilities and equipment and in respect of the need for a programme of a particular kind and level in relation to other similar programmes already on offer in the region.

At some stage in the future, but not before 2004, the formal accreditation of HE programmes will be effected via institutional visits by trained peer review teams. Institutions will no doubt be given due notice as to how these processes will operate so that they can ensure that the necessary systems are in place and that the institution is ready to undergo accreditation review.

In the short term, QA managers are advised to read this report and adapt the various policies and procedures used by other universities to the needs of their own institution. The real challenge is firstly to establish sound policies and procedures and then ensure their consistent application across the university thus assuring students of a high quality, higher education experience.

Key points

1. The demand for greater accountability and efficiency in respect of public financing, trends towards mass participation in the face of shrinking resources, and greater stakeholder scrutiny of education and training processes have led to the establishment of national QA agencies.

2. Audit is not neutral. Audits do as much to construct definitions of quality and performance as to monitor them.

3. The development of a national QA system has long been viewed as a critical component of the restructuring of higher education in South Africa.

4. The HEQC supports the view that the primary responsibility for the quality provision of programmes and for institutional quality assurance systems rests with the providers.
References


