CHE
COUNCIL ON HIGHER EDUCATION

FRAMEWORK FOR INSTITUTIONAL AUDITS

2021

Council on Higher Education

Published by the Council on Higher Education (CHE)

The CHE is an independent statutory body established in terms of the provisions of the Higher Education Act No. 101 of 1997, as amended. It advises the Minister responsible for higher education and training and is the national authority for external quality assurance and promotion in higher education. In terms of the National Qualifications Framework Act No. 67 of 2008, as amended, the CHE is the Quality Council for higher education responsible for, among others, the development, further development and management of the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF).

Copyright

ISBN: 978-1-928533-71-9

Publication date: March 2021

Contact details:

Council on Higher Education

1 Quintin Brand Street, Persequor Technopark, Brummeria

Pretoria, South Africa

Tel: 012 349 3840

www.che.ac.za

TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD

The Council on Higher Education (CHE) was established through the Higher Education Act (No. 101 of 1997, as amended) primarily to assure quality in the South African higher education sector and to advise the Minister on aspects of higher education. The National Qualifications Framework Act (No. 67 of 2008, as amended) conferred additional responsibilities on the CHE as the Quality Council for higher education, with overall responsibility for the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF). The CHE executes its quality assurance responsibilities through its permanent committee, the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC).

The HEQC's quality assurance mandate includes, amongst others, quality promotion and capacity development, institutional audits, standards development, national reviews, as well as programme accreditation and re-accreditation. With the new Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) approved by the HEQC and the Council of the CHE in September 2020, the CHE in general, and the role of institutional audits, in particular, will be in a state of transition as the QAF is implemented. The role of this *Framework for Institutional Audits* during the transition is spelt out throughout the document.

Continuity between the *Framework for Institutional Audits* and the QAF resides in:

- The institution remaining as the main unit of analysis and the principle that institutions are primarily responsible for their own quality assurance, with the outcomes of these institutional audits forming the baseline of an institutional track record;
- A review methodology based on self-evaluation and peer review as the tools in conducting institutional audits;
- A differentiated approach to institutional audits, and
- A focus on fitness of purpose and fitness for purpose as a view of quality.

Whilst institutional audits will be conducted according to this *Framework* in the transition to implementing the QAF fully, this *Framework* is a first step in aligning institutional audits with the future quality reviews envisioned in the QAF. In particular, the outcomes of this new round of institutional audits will lay a basis for the full implementation of the QAF.

From 2004 to 2011, the HEQC conducted what was then termed the 'first cycle' of institutional audits, with all public institutions in existence being audited at the time, and with a small number of private institutions participating on a voluntary basis. The audits were conducted according to the *2004 Framework for Institutional Audits*, which reflected the national imperative of promoting transformation in the higher education sector. The criteria for these audits focused on institutional arrangements for assuring quality in the core areas of teaching and learning, research, and community engagement within the broader scope of fitness of and for purpose — and took into account the immense historical inequalities within the system.

In 2008, the HEQC commissioned an external evaluation of its quality assurance mandate and functions. The *External Evaluation Report of the Higher Education Quality Committee – February 2009* stated that institutional audits had been a very successful part of the HEQC's work and were instrumental in promoting quality awareness in the sector. However, the report did identify several areas for improvement that the HEQC would need to address in developing and planning future institutional audits. It recommended that audit criteria be sufficiently differentiated and streamlined to respond to the history of the higher education sector in South Africa and that portfolios of evidence in support of institutional self-evaluations should be limited and directly relevant to the issues at hand in the audit. In addition, the process of conducting institutional audits should be shortened.

After the first cycle of audits, the *Quality Enhancement Project* (QEP) was developed and approved in 2013. The QEP's aim was to promote the likelihood of student success by focusing on teaching and learning in the higher education sector, specifically on interventions aimed at enhancing the following: university teachers' capabilities, student support and development, the actual learning environment and more effective management of module- and programme enrolments. Phase 1 of the QEP was implemented between 2014 and 2017. Phase 2, using curriculum as the focus area, was implemented in 2017. Synthesis reports effectively concluded the QEP.

Whilst the QEP was instrumental in refocusing the sector on issues affecting student success, there were nonetheless strong and growing calls for the HEQC to reintroduce institutional audits in accordance with its legislated mandate. A further concern about perceived or real quality issues in the sector may have been related to the number of institutions placed under administration by the then-Minister of Higher Education and Training. Consequently, the HEQC developed several iterations of a new institutional audit framework in consultation with public and private higher education institutions. The first consultation process, which took place in October 2017, informed the Draft Framework that was piloted and refined in 2019. A further consultation process with the higher education sector, including all public and private institutions, took place in May and June 2020 on the penultimate draft of this current *Framework*.

The *Framework* and *Manual for Institutional Audits* is a culmination of the lessons drawn from the pilot institutional audits and the extensive comments received from the sector in June. The *Framework* provides the principles underpinning the HEQC's approach to the next round of institutional audits which will be based on this *Framework.* It draws on lessons from the first cycle of audits, developments in the quality assurance space, as well as the national and global contexts. A central tenet of the HEQC's approach to audits is striking a delicate balance between accountability and improvement, requiring institutions to critically reflect on and account for what they do towards enhancing the likelihood of student success and providing their students with a quality experience, using their internal quality assurance processes. In order to achieve both parity and fairness in the outcomes of the audits, the same *Framework*

for Institutional Audits is to be used for both public and private higher education institutions. The way in which institutions, both public and private, are differentiated is described in greater detail in this *Framework* and in the *Manual for Institutional Audits.* For example, one of the ways in which private higher education institutions are to be differentiated from public universities is that their institutional audit outcomes may contribute to the HEQC/CHE's recommendation to the DHET for re-registration of private institutions, their programmes, sites and/or modes of provision. The recommendation to the DHET will also take into account information on the institution from national reviews, accreditation, as well as any complaints, which would have been considered when constructing the lines of enquiry for a particular institutional audit.

This approach, which is based on the evaluation of the internal quality assurance (IQA) of institutions, also requires the CHE to implement capacity development programmes at institutional and sectoral levels. Capacity development focuses firstly on workshops to prepare institutions for the audits, and, secondly, on supporting them in the preparation of a reflective Self-Evaluation Report, based on the audit focus areas, the related standards and guidelines. Experienced peer academics serve as audit panelists and are supported by the CHE in the critical areas of institutional audits, including undertaking the triangulation of evidence and abiding by an ethical code of conduct.

At the time this *Framework* was being finalised, the higher education sector, and the global community as whole, were facing a sustained and unprecedented level of disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has once again exposed the inequalities in the system, particularly in terms of how institutions were able to deploy resources and capacities in response to the crisis. As part of the coordinated national effort to ensure continuation of academic activities, the CHE developed *Quality Assurance Guidelines for Teaching and Learning and Assessment during the COVID-19 Pandemic* (*QA Guidelines*) and, a shorter version of the document, *QA Guidelines during the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Abbreviated Resource* (*Abbreviated Resource*) for use by the sector. These guidelines were specifically aimed at dealing with the pandemic during the 2020 academic year. The pandemic also inevitably affected the CHE's activities and processes. For example, the traditional on-site visits were largely replaced by online engagements. The operational details on how disruptions such as these will change traditional institutional audit processes such as the site visits are more clearly reflected in the *Manual for Institutional Audits*, which also reflects the rapid nature of the changes in the national responses required to manage the pandemic.

To ensure that higher education institutions are prepared for and responsive to future disruption of the magnitude and scale experienced during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, the HEQC has embedded these guidelines for institutional arrangements in the new standards for institutional audits. It has become increasingly necessary for institutions to deal effectively with all kinds of disruption, and to be able to show that they are prepared for and can deal with such disruptions without compromising quality.

The CHE would like to acknowledge all contributions to the development of this *Framework*, including the current and former (acting) Directors of Institutional Audits, other Directors in the CHE, the former CEO of the CHE, the former acting CEO of the CHE, members of the Institutional Audits Committee and the Reference Group, as well as the institutions that had volunteered for pilot audits, the HEQC and Council, and all the key stakeholders who played an important role in shaping this *Framework*.

Dr Whitfield Green

Chief Executive Officer

Council on Higher Education

LIST OF ACRONYMS

CHE	Council on Higher Education, the Council
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
EQA	External Quality Assurance
HE Act	Higher Education Act, 101 of 1997, as amended
HEI	Higher Education Institution (including public and private institutions)
HEMIS	Higher Education Management Information System (for public institutions)
HEQC	Higher Education Quality Committee
HEQCIS	Higher Education Quality Committee Information System (for private institutions)
HEQSF	Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework
IAC	Institutional Audits Committee of the Higher Education Quality Committee
ICTs	Information and Communication Technologies
IQA	Internal Quality Assurance
QC	Quality Council
QEP	Quality Enhancement Project
QMS	Quality Management System
MOOCs	Massive Open Online Courses
NPPSET	National Plan for Post-School Education and Training
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
NQF Act	National Qualifications Framework Act, No. 67 of 2008, as amended
OERs	Open Educational Resources
PoE	Portfolio of Evidence
PSET	Post-School Education and Training
SER	Self-Evaluation Report

DEFINITIONS OF KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Audit focus areas are those aspects of institutional quality management systems identified for higher educational audits, together with their associated standards and guidelines, approved by the HEQC and Council, and which are used by institutional audit panels to assess institutions.

Audit cycle is a finite series of engagements that forms the institutional audit from initiation, through preparing the self-evaluation report (SER), the site visit(s), to the final audit report, and includes the development of improvement plans by the institution concerned, and its reporting to a final close-out report that is accepted by the HEQC and Council.

Coherence refers, in the context of a quality management system, to a reasonable and functional relationship among the components of the quality system.

Core academic functions are learning and teaching, research, and community engagement, with the understanding that individual institutions may focus differently on various aspects of these functions, based on their vision, mission and strategic goals.

Differentiation refers to functional differences among institutions, and to differences in identity, mission and quality management maturity; in this *Framework*, the focus on differentiation recognises and works with these functional differences, whereas, in the Quality Assurance Framework (QAF), the focus shifts to the maturity of quality management within institutions.

Effective refers, in the context of a quality management system, to a system that accomplishes its intended purpose.

Efficient refers, in the context of a quality management system, to a system that accomplishes its intended purpose while using time, effort and resources well; that is, the QMS provides value for money to the institution.

External quality assurance is the way that an external quality agency assures that an institution has Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) systems in place that manage the quality of its activities and educational provision.

Graduate attributes are the qualities, knowledge, skills and values that students can reasonably be expected to acquire at an institution through their varied experiences and efforts, and which include critical thinking, the ethical and professional behaviour required of a graduate, and a capacity to take what has been learnt beyond the site of learning in order to become an active citizen.

Guidelines indicate why a particular standard is important, describe its salient features and indicates how standards could reasonably be interpreted and implemented in different contexts.

Institutional audit refers to an external quality review process of an institution's quality management system and its constituent elements, based on that institution's identity, nature, context and strategic goals. Such a review systematically and objectively evaluates the system's appropriateness, coherence and effectiveness in assuring the quality of institutional delivery of higher education's core functions.

Institutional culture refers to a set of interrelated assumptions, attitudes, values and behaviours shared by most stakeholders at an institution.

Integrated community engagement refers to one of the core functions of higher education involving working constructively and co-operatively with communities which are connected to the institution, in order to make that institution more adaptive and responsive to needs that it could service. Such integrated community engagement has the potential to affect or influence almost every aspect of an institution's functioning. Community engagement should be specifically integrated with learning, teaching and research and should be based on and enhance the disciplinary knowledge and expertise of the institution.

Internal quality assurance is the integrated institutional system of people, policies, processes and practices used to manage and strengthen the quality of its delivery of the core academic and associated functions, as determined by its vision, mission and strategic goals.

Minister refers to the Minister responsible for Higher Education and Training in South Africa.

Quality is understood to encompass fitness of purpose, fitness for purpose, value for money and transformation.

Quality assurance is the process of putting in place and delivering on i) the strategic goals and purposes that an institution has identified for itself and ii) the programmes for delivering sets of learning experiences that support students in attaining the qualifications to which they lead; it also refers to the process of evaluating and providing evidence of the extent to which institutions fulfil their own quality assurance objectives.

Quality culture refers to a set of interrelated and enacted assumptions, values, attitudes, activities and behaviours, shared by most academic and support employees at an institution that, together, function to deliver the desired quality of learning and teaching, research and community engagement determined by the vision, mission and strategic goals of that institution.

Quality enhancement refers to initiatives developed and implemented to raise an institution's standards and the quality of its provisioning beyond that of the threshold standards and benchmarks.

Quality improvement refers to the planned programme of activities that institutionalise a quality culture and that develops quality practices better than those that existed previously. Such quality improvement is usually as a direct response to an internal institutional evaluation and/or an external peer review.

Quality management system refers to the institutional arrangements that assure the quality of learning and teaching, assessment, research, and community engagement. Such an integrated, internal system supports, develops, enhances and monitors the institution's delivery of the core functions of higher education.

Reflective and generative methodology is an approach that helps practitioners to reflect on the institutional *status quo*, and to develop standards and their associated guidelines. Such an approach creates a deeper understanding of the standards and helps the practitioners to find solutions to difficulties and opportunities for innovation in order for the institution to remain relevant and responsive.

Special institutional audit refers to the audit of a particular institution that is initiated by the HEQC outside of the normal audit cycle and is based on an individual HEQC- and Council-approved Terms of Reference and methodology. Special institutional audits are usually requested by the Minister.

Standards refer to codes of practice for quality assurance used in higher education, which HEIs must consider and adhere to in all aspects of their activities and all types of higher education provision.

Student experience is regarded as students' comprehensive and holistic engagement with a particular institution, their own efforts and experience of various modes of learning and teaching, curricular design within programmes, assessment practices, access to and use of appropriate learning resources, the management of student enrolment as well as academic and non-academic student support and development.

Student success is defined, for the individual student, as the attainment of graduate attributes that are personally, professionally and socially valuable; for the institution, it refers to students' academic persistence in completing their studies, academic results that reflect equity of success in terms of race, gender, and disability, as well as their achieving credible results within a minimum time to completion; successful entry into employment or some other form of economic activity and/or successfully progressing to postgraduate studies.[1]

Themed audit refers to an audit of limited scope at national or institutional levels, based on an HEQC- and Council-approved Terms of Reference and methodology, which focuses on a specific area of interest at a particular time.

---

[1] CHE (January 2014) *Framework for Institutional Quality Enhancement in the Second Period of Quality Assurance*, p. 13.

1. QUALITY ASSURANCE AND THE SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

1.1. Introduction

Social, historical, economic, environmental, political and technological contexts profoundly affect higher education institutions (HEIs) in South Africa, leading to great diversity in institutional missions and culture, capacity, available resources, student demographics and performance. The best resourced and capacitated institutions compete with institutions worldwide for international ranking, while those not as well endowed, often as a result of historical factors such as under-funding and lack of capacity since inception, may struggle to provide students with a valuable educational experience in poorly maintained, equipped and managed learning spaces, even though some institutions do achieve this in spite of the constraints.

Whilst differentiation in the higher education sector, in the sense of HEIs having different missions, is valued, it should not justify a difference in the quality of provision provided. Yet, disparities do exist in funding and in the quality of the student experience offered by different institutions in the higher education system. Students who enter higher education need the assurance that their student experience and the qualifications they are awarded are of a quality that enables them to achieve success individually and as members of society. Regardless of mission, HEIs must remain accountable for the quality of the student experience and its fostering the likelihood of student success.

One of the biggest changes in South African higher education in the last two decades has been the shift in student demographics. A growth in student numbers has been accompanied by a decline in funding, growth in the number of students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds, unprecedented student unrest as demonstrated prior to and in the #FeesMustFall groundswell and its impact on national policy. All these factors have had, and continue to have, serious implications for quality, accountability, the transformation of institutions and for the regulatory environment. Unforeseen circumstances such as the COVID-19 pandemic, economic changes and environmental factors will almost certainly continue to impact on higher education institutions in unexpected and unimagined ways.

Quality assurance is one of the three steering mechanisms used at the national level in the higher education sector, the other two being funding and policy-based planning.

This *Framework for Institutional Audits*, its unique context notwithstanding, is closely aligned to both the African and the European Standards and Guidelines for quality assurance in higher education in that these two sets of Standards and Guidelines formed input into the design of this *Framework*.[2]

---

[2] See *African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education.* 2019. Online: https://enqa.eu/indirme/papers-and-reports/associated-reports/ASG-QA%20English.pdf; *Standards and*

Against this background, the Council on Higher Education (CHE) as the legislated Quality Council for higher education in South Africa, and its standing committee, the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC), are mandated to audit the quality assurance practices of South African higher education institutions. (See Annexure A for the legislative context and national policy governing the CHE in South Africa).[3]

The CHE, through the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC), exercises its quality assurance function using a variety of mechanisms, one of which is institutional audits that are mandated by the Higher Education Act. The various quality assurance functions of the HEQC are described in Annexure B, which also contains a short history of the first institutional audits in the period 2004-2011, a full assessment of the institutional audits as well as an account of the Quality Enhancement Project which followed.

Given the positive and comprehensive outcomes of the first institutional audits, the CHE, through the HEQC, continues its programme of institutional audits (cf. Annexure B.3). This new *Framework for Institutional Audits* and its attendant *Manual for Institutional Audits* are key instruments to regulate the implementation of institutional audits. These documents are also aligned in important aspects to the new Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) that was approved by the HEQC and Council in September 2020 and which will be implemented in the medium term by the CHE. The continuities and discontinuities between this *Framework* and the QAF are discussed below.

1.2. The context of higher education in South Africa

As a national sector, higher education in South Africa has registered some successes since 1994 but challenges nevertheless remain.[4] At national level more generally, the external situational analysis in the *CHE's Strategic Plan 2020-2025* states that "Unemployment, poverty and inequality remain pressing developmental challenges and threaten political stability."[5] These challenges were first explicated in the policy vision of the *White Paper for Post-School Education and Training* (2013) and then in the *National Plan for Post-School Education and Training* (NPPSET, 2019), which directly inform both planning and funding as drivers of the post-school education and training sector in the NPPSET time frame from 2019 to 2030. Quality assurance, and

---

Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). 2015. Brussels, Belgium. Online: https://enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ESG_2015.pdf; and Council on Higher Education Accreditation. 2015. *International Quality Principles.* Online: https://www.chea.org/sites/default/files/other-content/Quality%20Principles.pdf.

[3] The *Framework* and *Manual for Institutional Audits* continues to use the term 'audit' based on the Higher Education Act, 101 of 1997, as amended, which mandates the CHE to *audit* institutions. It should, however, be noted that in these institutional audits a *review* methodology will be followed, and that in the QAF there will be a transition to Institutional Reviews.

[4] CHE (2016) *South African Higher Education Reviewed: Two Decades of Democracy*.

[5] CHE (2019) *Strategic Plan 2020-2025.*

specifically the external quality assurance function of the HEQC, forms the third driver that supports the sector to achieve national goals. The NPPSET's system-wide goal for "improved quality of post-school education and training provision" has several explicitly identified outcomes which were considered in the development of this *Framework.*

Some of the achievements of the sector to date are in terms of growth in access but also in greater equity of access. In 2018, a total of 1 085 567 students accessed higher education in South Africa (up from 584 713 in 2001, and 938 040 in 2012). Of these, 76% were African, 6% Coloured, 4% Indian, 13% White, and 60% were Female. However, funding and academic staffing have not kept pace with this rapid growth in the sector. Increasing student-staff ratios, pressure for increased student support, pressure on student fees, and an expectation for institutions to generate third-stream income all divert academics' attention from the core academic project. The process of aligning the qualifications in the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF) to the requirements of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) has also taken up the resources and time of both higher education institutions and the CHE, but has now successfully been completed.

Some of the growth in the sector is based on growth in private provision as well as in distance education, both at the University of South Africa and through contact institutions also having taken up blended and distance modes of provision, specifically using various forms of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), following the *Policy for the Provision of Distance Education in South African Universities in the Context of an Integrated Post-School System* (2014).

Higher education is becoming increasingly internationalised with cross-border offerings now available, as well as with industry-related, just-in-time and open education opportunities (in the form of OERs, MOOCs, and micro-credentials, amongst others). The uptake of these online offerings highlights the residual inequality in South Africa through the so-called digital divide. At the same time, these online developments do not necessarily respond directly to pressing local needs such as unemployment, poverty alleviation, food security, health, security and education, or to global challenges like climate change and environmental degradation. These needs are mentioned in the *Higher Education Amendment Act (Act No. 9 of 2016*, as amended) which explicitly refers to the transformational imperative to which higher education institutions are obliged to respond, not only in terms of the demographics of staff and students, but also in terms of curriculum reform (to address some of the pressing needs mentioned above) and pedagogical renewal.

Positive trends in higher education in South Africa notwithstanding, an alarming number of public institutions (seven since 2011) were placed under administration by the Minister of Higher Education and Training in terms of Section 44E of the Higher Education Act 101 of 1997, as amended. Whilst the issues leading to such drastic steps

are usually related to governance, financial management and sustainability, they may also have impacted the academic project and quality management at these institutions.

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, and the national regulations that followed the declaration of a state of disaster, have affected higher education dramatically. The restrictions on public gatherings resulted in all contact institutions rapidly suspending their activities and, under huge pressure, resorting to remote teaching, learning and assessment. The way in which institutions have managed this process has no doubt had financial and educational costs. In an effort to support and guide institutions during the 2020 academic year and beyond in terms of quality concerns, the Council on Higher Education has, through the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC), approved *Quality Assurance Guidelines for Teaching and Learning and Assessment During the COVID-19 Pandemic* and *QA Guidelines during the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Abbreviated Resource* for use throughout the sector, for use in both public and private institutions.

2. INSTITUTIONAL AUDITS

2.1. Context for institutional audits

Institutional audits are strongly influenced by both the specific context within which each HEI works, and by the national transformational agenda within which higher education functions. The HEQC has identified a need to audit either certain functions of all HEIs or of specifically identified HEIs, both public and private, or to do full audits of particular HEIs. A full audit of an institution determines whether or not, and to what extent, an institution's IQA systems, policies and procedures ensure the effective provisioning of good quality higher education that enhances the likelihood of student success through quality learning and teaching, research opportunities and integrated community engagement. The emphasis is less on ensuring that required standards are met at a particular threshold than on the deliberate, continuous, systematic and measurable improvement of the student experience.

It should be emphasised from the outset that institutional audits undertaken from a quality assurance perspective are neither forensic nor inquisitorial investigations. They are, however, aimed at assessing the integrated quality management systems at institutions with a specific focus on the management of the core academic functions of higher education, that is, teaching and learning, research, and community engagement, as framed by their respective vision, mission and strategic goals. The ways in which governance, financial management and sustainability impact on the delivery of the academic project and the quality management system at an institution, may, however, form part of an institutional audit from a quality perspective.

Conducting external quality assurance of HEIs is an important HEQC mandate achieved through institutional audits and national reviews. Proceeding from the

premise that HEIs are responsible for their own internal quality management systems, quality management comprises the following:[6]

a. A *quality assurance system* that includes planning, policies, systems, strategies and resources used by the institution to satisfy itself that its quality requirements and standards are being set, met and periodically reviewed;

b. *quality support*, being the active, actioned support provided by the quality management system to develop, sustain, and enhance existing levels of quality; and

c. *quality monitoring,* being that part of the system that records and reports back to the institution – and by extension, to the HEQC and CHE as the external quality assurer – on the critical aspects identified in the institutional QA policies and systems, and includes matters of sustainability, positive developments and use of resources.

The new round of institutional audits takes account of the experience gained from the first cycle of institutional audits, and a more focused, differentiated and simplified approach is followed. There is no longer a sector-wide one-size-fits-all 'cycle' of audits. Instead, each institution enters its own institutional audit cycle based on a variety of parameters which are described in more detail in sections 2.5 and 2.6.

The current round of institutional audits is being conducted at a time when the CHE is in transition toward implementing the new QAF approved by the HEQC and Council. This *Framework,* aligning as it does with the QAF in a number of important ways, is thus part of the transition to implementing the QAF fully.

The new QAF is based on the principle that higher education institutions are primarily responsible for assuring quality internally. Institutions are thus accountable for the quality of learning and teaching, the educational experiences accorded to their students, and the competencies that their graduates acquire during their studies. HEIs are also accountable for the quality and impact of their research outputs and innovation activities, the strength and value of their community engagement, where relevant to their missions, as well as the support provided for the core academic functions. In order to do this, HEIs need to ensure that well-established and fully functional internal quality assurance systems are in place. This *Framework for Institutional Audits* is designed to assist institutions to strengthen their IQA systems.

This *Framework* continues to use the term 'audit' based on the Higher Education Act, 101 of 1997, as amended, which mandates the CHE to *audit* institutions. It should, however, be noted that in these institutional audits *a review methodology*, *consisting of self-evaluation and peer review, is followed*. The use of self-evaluation and peer review are familiar features of international practice and congruent with the future trajectory determined by the new QAF. The review methodology in this *Framework* is,

---

[6] CHE (June 2004) *Framework for Institutional Audits*, p. 4.

however, not yet fully congruent with the one that will be used in the future QAF, which will be extended to include a reflective and generative methodology used to build communities of practice and to develop standards.

The points of continuity between the *Framework for Institutional Audits* and the QAF are:

> a. The institution remains the primary unit of analysis.
> b. The principle holds that institutions are primarily responsible for assuring quality, with the outcomes of these institutional audits forming the baseline of an institutional track record.
> c. A review methodology based on self-evaluation and peer review is used to conduct institutional audits.
> d. The approach to institutional audits is differentiated in accordance with the institution's individual response to historical and contextual factors, and
> e. Fitness *of* purpose and fitness *for* purpose frame the view of quality being audited.

Important as the practical and/or technical aspects of an external quality assurance function are, this *Framework* and its accompanying *Manual* are now aligned to the QAF in terms of its foundational approach and philosophical orientation. In *A Report on the Conceptualisation of a New Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) for Higher Education in South Africa* (CHE, 2020), the CHE undertook extensive analysis and reflection so as to develop the foundations of the new QAF. This analysis covered, amongst other things, the legislative mandate and role of the CHE, an external environmental analysis, and an analysis of both international trends in higher education and in external quality assurance, as well as in the context of South African higher education.

This *Framework* and its accompanying *Manual* are committed to follow the foundational precepts of the QAF, particularly in the nature and spirit of the standards and guidelines:

> a. Ongoing and continuing transformation issues, particularly as related to curriculum and pedagogical renewal, are emphasized as an important priority of both internal and external quality assurance through this *Framework* and will be further expanded as a focus in the new QAF. Institutions are now required to articulate their roles in relation to social impact and social justice, as well their understanding of the knowledge structures that inform their curriculum design and programme delivery. Whilst the CHE does not prescribe to institutions what their positions on these matters should be, institutions now have to show, with evidence, how they engage with these issues, particularly as they relate to quality provision.
> b. The re-introduction of broader institutional audits intends to support the move away from the CHE's almost exclusive focus on input quality in

Programme Accreditation to broader institutional accountability for programme delivery, engagement with student learning, the achievement of programme goals and outcomes in terms of student retention and success, and the quality and impact of programme output. Institutions have to account for the relevance and coherence of their educational activities, striking an appropriate balance between input, output and quality outcomes. Regular programme and curriculum reviews are an important internal quality assurance mechanism that inform the institutional audits.

c. The way in which institutions have responded to the role of technology and the fourth industrial revolution (4IR) in society, in the world of work and in education will similarly come under scrutiny in the institutional audits and will continue to be a theme in the implementation of the QAF. Institutions are expected to focus on improving the quality of, and their capacity for, blended and online learning, mindful that large numbers of poor students do not have access to online learning facilities and that many academics are, as yet, untrained for the blended and online mode of provision. Institutions must also be able to account for how the move to remote teaching, learning and assessment was managed during the COVID-19 pandemic and other disruptions and how quality of provision was consciously maintained.

d. An increase in the data analytic capability of HEIs is an important new aspect required by this *Framework* as well as by the QAF. This analytic capability includes, but is not limited to, descriptive data, determining meaningful indicators, designing data collection instruments, analysing and interpreting data, as well as predictive data analytics. The internal institutional data capabilities of HEIs and their relationship to effective decision-making and quality improvement will become increasingly important.

One of the major purposes of the external quality assurance system, for both these institutional audits and the new QAF, is to ensure that institutions have developed effective internal quality assurance systems, which provide an enabling framework for the provision of high-quality programmes, effective student support, flexible learning modes and innovative pedagogies in order to improve access, retention and success. Reviews will assay how deeply all staff have internalised these quality assurance principles and measures and how these are reflected in their day-to-day practice. In summary, the key insights that have influenced the development of the QAF and that inform its priorities also form the foundation of this *Framework* and its accompanying *Manual*.

2.2. Principles for institutional audits

The following principles guide an institutional audit:

1. The primary responsibility for internal quality assurance rests with individual HEIs. Each institution is responsible for the establishment, implementation, maintenance, improvement and enhancement of its own quality management and assurance systems.

2. The uniqueness of each institution's size, shape, location, context and mission is recognised.

3. The value of institutional audits rests on the compilation of credible, contextually relevant and reliable information that is required for internal quality-related planning and self-evaluation, peer review and public reporting (for example, by publishing executive summaries).

4. Student experience, student engagement and participation and the student voice are central to an evaluation of an institution's quality management system.

5. The institutional audit is a peer-driven and evidence-based process to ensure that the HEQC and its audit panel reports are transparent, informed and consistent.

6. Institutional audits are developmental and intent on supporting continuous quality improvement and enhancement.

7. Institutional audits are required to balance their developmental character with the regulatory requirement that the CHE and the HEQC act on poor provisioning where institutions have no clear commitments, processes, practices or plans to improve.

8. Institutional audits are a key component of the HEQC's broad-based quality assurance mandate.

2.3. General objectives of an institutional audit

The general objectives of institutional audits are the following:

1. Audits encourage and support HEIs to develop, implement, maintain and strengthen their internal quality assurance systems within a culture where institutional self-reflection leads to continuous quality improvement through verifying and validating its own compliance with its quality assurance arrangements.

2. Audits assist HEIs to develop reliable, robust and evidence-based quality assurance processes that are reflected in their policies, rules, standards and indicators such that the HEQC is assured of the coherence and effectiveness of the quality management of their core functions.

3. Audits serve as one external mechanism, among others, to protect students from inferior educational provision and negative student

experiences; they also assure society that the internal quality assurance system in an institution is an important safeguard for protecting the quality of an institution's qualifications.

4. Audits provide the HEQC with baseline information about institutions using a common set of expectations within a differentiated system, in order to:

   a. identify and disseminate nuanced good practice in quality management throughout the higher education sector;

   b. facilitate the design of capacity development and improvement programmes by the HEQC and other stakeholders; and

   c. generate an informed national picture of institutional quality arrangements in higher education.

The objectives of themed and special institutional audits will, however, be based on specially developed HEQC- and Council-approved Terms of Reference.

2.4. The purpose of an institutional audit

The overarching purpose of an institutional audit, as an external quality assurance mechanism, is to evaluate the coherence and effectiveness of an institution's internal quality assurance system in enabling student success, and improving its core academic functions, namely, learning and teaching, research, and community engagement. The evaluation, based on institutional self-reflection followed by peer review, serves to validate and verify the institutional self-evaluation and recommends improvements.

An additional purpose of these institutional audits is to provide baseline information that forms an input into the institutional track record that will form the basis for the implementation of the QAF. For private higher education institutions, the verification of their IQA system serves to determine whether they are at the level where the HEQC may recommend their re-registration, and the approval of their programmes, sites and/or modes of provision to the DHET.

In a *coherent* quality assurance system, reasonable and functional relationships exist between the approaches, mechanisms and discrete interventions of the system across all institutional levels and processes. Such a coherent QA system is also integral to the governance, management, planning and resource allocation of an institution so as to enhance the likelihood of student success.

An *effective* quality assurance system, realises its intended purpose to support and enhance student learning experiences, improve teaching and research, and integrated community engagement, where relevant, in relation to the strategic intent and strategic goals of the institution.

Being outcomes-focused, each institutional audit is individually designed to evaluate the quality-related actions that the institution undertakes to assure its core academic functions and to achieve its strategic goals as determined by its own vision, mission and planning. The HEQC does not prescribe the quality structures and processes that an institution should establish; rather its concern is to evaluate how *well* the institution's quality management system functions within the context of its own differentiated mission and plans. This requires the gathering of evidence from a range of internal and external stakeholders. Evidence may be both quantitative and qualitative, may be focused on input activities, on process and on output and/or impact, depending on the specific standard under consideration. Qualitative evidence may be in the form of policies, evidence of external reviews, and other types of narratives, whereas quantitative evidence is not simply raw data but should be analysed and interpreted in support of the assertions made by the institution.

2.5. Scope of an institutional audit

As stated earlier, an institutional audit is conducted to determine the coherence, effectiveness and efficiency of the institution's internal quality assurance system of its core functions in enhancing students' likelihood of success. These quality assurance mechanisms are directed towards improving learning and teaching, research and community engagement, particularly in relation to the institution's unique mission.

The scope of the institutional audit is established by agreement between the CHE and the institution concerned, based not only on its vision and mission but also on sectoral trends and specific concerns that may have emerged from the institutional profile, previous HEQC findings or from complaints whose investigation appear warranted.

The scope of an institutional audit is discussed with each institution at the start of the audit process, and so, for example, the scope of an institutional audit of a small specialised private higher education institution offering only one programme will differ from a full institutional audit of a public university.

An institutional audit evaluates the following key focus areas:

1. The role played in its quality management by the institution's governance and strategic planning (which reflects its vision, mission and strategic goals), as well as its management and academic leadership.
2. The design and implementation of the internal quality assurance system with specific reference to the support, development and enhancement, as well as the monitoring and control it provides in the deliberate integration of quality into its core functions. Particular attention is paid to management action and decision-making arising from previous findings and responses to earlier HEQC findings.

3. The coherence and integration of the various internal quality assurance components align reasonably and functionally with the institution's governance, management, planning and resource allocation processes. Together, the various quality assurance components enhance the likelihood of student success and improve the manner and substance of learning and teaching, research and community engagement.

4. In line with the QAF, the fourth focus area concentrates on how effectively the institutional quality management system supports curriculum review and development, improves students' engagement with learning and teaching and enhances the likelihood of student success.

2.6. Differentiation, duration and time frames

The new QAF adopts a differentiated approach to quality assurance that is followed in this *Framework*. This differentiated approach acknowledges various dimensions of institutional identity, namely

- the uniqueness of different institutions and institutional types with their differentiated missions and niche areas;
- the unique context in which each institution is situated; and
- the different levels of institutional maturity in terms of the effectiveness of their IQA systems.

The current *Framework* adopts these notions of differentiation from the QAF, but focuses on the first two dimensions, whilst the third dimension, quality assurance maturity, becomes a focus in the QAF.

The first two dimensions of differentiation are particularly relevant for private higher education institutions. The nature and context of each institution is considered in terms of, amongst other factors, its mission. Individual institutional audits may therefore differ in terms of duration and scope based on the nature, complexity and context of the individual institution. Institutional type and geographical location, amongst other things, will also determine which institutions are chosen for auditing, as well as the timing and scope of the audit.

2.6.1. Individual institutional audits

In future, the institutional audit cycles will be synchronized as far as possible to the implementation of the QAF. In terms of time frames, audit cycles for private institutions may be aligned to their re-registration periods. Institutional audit outcomes from this present round will form input into the QAF and will impact on the future external quality assurance functions for that institution.

Ongoing institutional self-evaluation, based on the principle that institutions themselves are responsible for their quality assurance, is required as a permanent feature of an institution's quality management system. This is in keeping with the HEQC's intention to promote continuous quality improvement that goes beyond a culture of compliance with minimum criteria.

This *Framework* is implemented through its accompanying *Manual for Institutional Audits.* The *Manual* provides a detailed outline of the roles and responsibilities of the different stakeholders in an institutional audit. It outlines the expectations that the HEQC has of the institution and how the process of the audit unfolds from initiation to closure. Whilst this *Framework* remains in place for this round of institutional audits, the *Manual* is operational in nature and may be updated or supplemented from time to time. Training will be provided to institutions to prepare them for their institutional audit. For example, a supplementary manual will be prepared specifically to support private higher education institutions.

The implementation strategy for this *Framework* allows the HEQC to report annually on progress with institutional audits, as well as on the state of quality assurance at institutional level in the sector. This *Framework* moves away from a sector-wide audit cycle to institution-specific cycles, which means that there will no longer be a clear end to an audit cycle for the entire sector.

In consultation with the institution involved, the HEQC determines the specific date(s) for initiating the institutional audit well in advance of the audit visit(s) to allow time for the institution to prepare.

2.6.2. Special Institutional Audits

It is possible for the HEQC and Council to decide on conducting a special institutional audit of a particular institution if:

(i)   required to do so by the Minister and in accordance with specified terms of reference; or

(ii)   there has been a noticeable increase and persistence in verified quality-related complaints against an institution which remain unresolved; or

(iii)   there are substantial concerns arising from programme accreditation reports and/or national reviews.

The decision as to whether a special audit may be undertaken, lies solely with the HEQC and Council. The specifics of how, when and in what time frames, by whom and under which applicable circumstances or conditions will be specified in advance through an approved Terms of Reference for that special audit.

2.6.3. Themed Audits

The HEQC and Council may also decide to conduct themed audits. Themed audits may focus on a particular sector, area, process or situation in higher education that is of concern and that requires immediate investigation and possible intervention. Such an audit with its specific theme is announced in advance by the HEQC and is then conducted in terms of an HEQC- and Council-approved Terms of Reference. Themed audits are based on the development of a SER and portfolio of evidence by each institution. After an evaluation by the HEQC, site visits may take place should further information-gathering and triangulation be thought necessary. Improvement plans may subsequently be requested and monitored by the HEQC.

3. FOCUS AREAS AND STANDARDS FOR INSTITUTIONAL AUDITS

The standards in this *Framework* were developed by a reference group of peer academics in consultation with the sector.

The four focus areas of institutional audits as outlined below cover the three core academic activities of higher education institutions (learning and teaching, research, and integrated community engagement), and the fourth focuses on additional standards that relate to learning and teaching specifically. The standards are elaborated with guidelines in the *Manual for Institutional Audits*. These guidelines explain why a standard is important and how it may be understood in different contexts.

The following standards will apply in a differentiated manner, taking due cognisance of the size, mission and context of institutions:

Focus area 1: Governance, strategic planning, management and leadership support the core academic functions

The four standards in Focus Area 1 concentrate on the role that an institution's *governance, strategic planning* (as contained in its *vision, mission and strategic goals), management and academic leadership* play in its quality management in order to enhance the likelihood of student success and to improve the quality of learning, teaching and research engagement, as well as accommodating the results of constructive, integrated community engagement. These standards are:

Standard 1: The institution has a clearly stated vision and mission, and strategic goals that have been approved by appropriate governance structures, subject to comprehensive stakeholder engagement.

Standard 2: The stated vision, mission and strategic goals align with national priorities and context (e.g. transformation, creating a skilled labour force, developing scarce skills areas and a critical citizenry and contributing to the fulfilment of national goals as informed by the NDP and related national planning), as well as sectoral, regional, continental and global imperatives (e.g. Africa Vision 2063 or the Sustainable Development Goals).

Standard 3: There is demonstrable strategic alignment between the institution's quality management system for core academic activities across all sites and modes of provision, and its vision, mission and strategic goals, as well as its governance and management processes.

Standard 4: There is a clear understanding of and demonstrable adherence to the different roles and responsibilities of the governance structures, management and academic leadership.

Focus area 2: The design and implementation of the institutional quality management system supports the core academic functions

The four standards in Focus Area 2 concentrate on how the *design and implementation of an integrated quality management system* in the institution enhances the likelihood of student success and improves the quality of learning, teaching and research, as well as accommodating the results of constructive, integrated community engagement within the context of the institution's mission. These standards are:

Standard 5: A quality assurance system is in place, comprising at a minimum of:

      (i)   governance arrangements
      (ii)   policies
      (iii)   processes, procedures and plans
      (iv)   instructional products
      (v)   measurement of impact, and
      (vi)   data management and utilisation

as these give effect to the delivery of the HEI's core functions.

Standard 6: Human, infrastructural, knowledge management and financial resources support the delivery of the institution's core academic functions across all sites of provision along with the concomitant quality management system, in accordance with the institution's mission.

Standard 7: Credible and reliable data (for example, on throughput and completion rates) are systematically captured, employed and analysed as an integral part of the institutional quality management system so as to inform consistent and sustainable decision-making.

Standard 8: Systems and processes monitor the institution's capacity for quality management, based on the evidence gathered.

Focus area 3: The coherence and integration of the institutional quality management system supports the core academic functions

The four standards in Focus Area 3 concentrate on the coherence and integration of the various components comprising the institutional quality management system and how these work in concert to support the likelihood of student success and improve the quality of learning, teaching and research, as well as accommodating the results of constructive integrated community engagement in accordance with the institution's mission. These standards are:

Standard 9: An evidence-based coherent, reasonable, functional and meaningfully structured relationship exists between all components of the institutional quality management system.

Standard 10: Evidence-based regular and dedicated governance and management oversight of the quality assurance system exists.

Standard 11: Planning and processes exist for the reasonable and functional allocation of resources to all components of the institutional quality management system.

Standard 12: The quality assurance system achieves its purpose efficiently and effectively.

Focus area 4: Curriculum development, learning and teaching support the likelihood of student success

The four standards in Focus Area 4 concentrate on how effectively the institutional quality management system enhances the likelihood of student success, improves learning and teaching and supports the scholarship of learning and teaching. These standards are:

Standard 13: An effective institutional system for programme design, approval, delivery, management and review is in place.

Standard 14: There is evidence-based engagement at various institutional levels, among staff, and among staff and students, with:

    a. curriculum transformation, curriculum reform and renewal
    b. learning and teaching innovation; and
    c. the role of technology (1) in the curriculum, (2) in the world of work, and (3) in society in general.

Standard 15: The students' exposure to learning and teaching at the institution across all sites and modes of provision is experienced by them as positive and enabling of their success.

Standard 16: Institutions engage with and reflect on the employability of their graduates in a changing world.

4. AUDIT METHODOLOGY AND PROCESS

Aligned as it is to international practice, the HEQC's audit methodology consists of an institutional self-evaluation report (SER), and an external peer review, verification and validation by peers. Self-evaluation and peer review are internationally accepted practice and are aligned to the future trajectory of the work of the CHE and HEQC in the new QAF. In future, the review methodology will be extended to include a reflective and generative methodology for developing the new standards for the institutional reviews to be conducted under the QAF.

The audit process is initiated with an institution when it is advised by the HEQC of its upcoming audit. Senior staff from the HEI and staff from the Institutional Audits Directorate of the CHE meet to discuss the scope and time frames and to induct the institution into the requirements for the audit, in particular the development of its SER, which comprises an institutional profile, an accompanying self-reflection and a portfolio of evidence in the focus area(s) or themes identified by the HEQC for the audit.

4.1. Institutional Self-Evaluation Report (SER)

An institutional profile, compiled by the institution, forms the first part of the SER. The information in the profile may be supplemented, if required, by additional information provided by the CHE, HEMIS (for public institutions) or HEQCIS (for private institutions) and the DHET.

The major portion of the SER is the institution's self-evaluation and self-reflection on its quality management system and is central to improving its quality management. In future, ongoing self-evaluation will allow institutions to verify, update and validate their portfolios with supporting information and evidence.

Self-evaluation needs to be understood as a meaning-making activity, and all levels and categories of staff, as well as units such as faculties and departments across the institution and across all sites of delivery, should participate, even though the professional quality assurance staff manage the process.

Supporting documentation relating to standards belonging to the identified focus area(s) serves as evidence to demonstrate how quality is managed at the institution.

The final SER, as approved by the HEI's governance structures, is submitted to the CHE for a quality check, and then is forwarded to the audit panel selected for the audit by the HEQC. The inducted audit panel then reviews the SER, conducts a site visit of the institution, and writes an audit report with commendations and recommendations.

4.2. Site visit and peer review of an institution's quality management

The audit panel is selected from a database of experienced and trained peers by the HEQC, and one panelist is appointed as chairperson. The institution being audited may object to a panel member based on a conflict of interest, but only on a substantiated basis. Such an objection will be considered, after which the HEQC will decide either to replace the panel member or to continue with him/her.

Panels will have between two and seven members and may include one or more international members depending on the complexity, size and specialised nature of the institution, and the scope of the audit. Larger, more complex institutions may require a larger panel, whereas a smaller panel could deal with smaller institutions' audits. Specialised institutions, either in terms of disciplinary area, mode of provision, or unique identity, may also require panel members that are experts in that specific area.

Panel members are provided with the institution's SER (inclusive of its institutional profile and its portfolio of evidence), institutional submissions and other relevant documentation. A site visit of one to five days is then arranged with the institution, based on its size and nature, and the audit's scope in relation to the identified focus areas. Site visits may be in the form of online engagements depending on prevailing conditions at the time of the audit.

Members of audit panels are always required to apply professional rigour and objectivity to their assessments of an institution's quality management system and to respect confidentiality. Evidence must be collected systematically, and the panel must provide a coherent rationale for its evaluation of each component of the institution's

quality management system. The panelists' evaluation must relate to the standards which exemplify the critical components and activities in the identified focus areas.

4.3. Evaluation and outcomes of an institutional audit

The outcomes of the audit are determined holistically, based on the overall validation of the claims made in the SER and the portfolio of evidence, which should show how the institution meets the standards, and then through the panel's overall engagement with interviewees during the site visit.

After the site visit, the panel drafts an audit report and submits it to the CHE. The panelists' audit report includes an overall assessment, based on their evaluations of the identified focus areas in accordance with the standards identified, and with a view to continuous improvement.

The outcomes of these institutional audits form input into the institutional track records on which the envisaged QAF will be based. For private higher education institutions, this overall assessment may contribute to the HEQC/CHE's recommendation to the DHET for re-registration of the institution, re-accreditation of its programmes, sites and/or modes of provision, in conjunction with other EQA functions.

In concluding, the panel makes a list of appropriate commendations and recommendations based on the standards applied during the audit, which are offered in the spirit of continual improvement. *All assessments of institutions are made against the standards*, and a four-point scale as follows is used:

Not functional:

Areas of serious concern exist in the institution's quality management system in that there is either no quality management system in place or the quality management system is not considered to be functional in terms of the identified standard.

Needs substantial improvement:

The institution's quality management system is not fully developed or functional in terms of the identified standard and needs substantial improvement.

Functional:

The quality management system in the institution meets the expected thresholds in terms of the identified standard but some minor areas may need further improvement.

Mature:

The institution's quality management system, <u>as measured against the identified standard</u>, is generally mature, integrated and coherent, and is effective in achieving its differentiated purpose of enabling student success; good learning and teaching practices; ground-breaking research, including local research; impactful, integrated and ethical community engagement, and demonstrates good, sustainable governance (as appropriate for the institution).

The overall and holistic evaluation of the institution, in the form of a narrative summary, forms the conclusion of the audit report.

4.4. Representations on the correctness of the audit report and the preliminary outcome of an institutional audit

The Institutional Audits Committee (IAC), a subcommittee of the HEQC, is responsible for assessing the panel audit reports. Its chairperson and members are appointed by the Nominations and Governance Committee of the CHE.

The audit panel chairperson presents the draft audit report of the institution concerned to the IAC, after which the IAC independently assesses the report and its recommended outcomes, as well as other relevant documentation, and then recommends a preliminary audit outcome.

The draft audit report with the preliminary outcomes from the IAC is sent to the institution for two purposes:

The *first* purpose is for the institution to make any corrections relating to factual inaccuracies. Corrections are to be reported to the IAC within 4 weeks of the institution's receiving the audit report.

The *second* purpose is for the institution, should it wish to do so, to make representations to the IAC on the preliminary outcomes of the audit within 4 weeks of having received the audit report. Representations may be in the form of a motivation for changing the preliminary outcome, argued on the basis of overlooked information or evidence. The motivation must be evidence-based.

The institution submits its corrections and representations which are then considered by the IAC. The IAC may consult the audit panel before making a final recommendation to the HEQC.

The HEQC decides on the outcome after consideration of all the evidence provided by the IAC, the institution, the review panel and any other relevant documentation.

The HEQC decision is conveyed to the institution and is both final and binding on the institution. The CHE makes every attempt to ensure that institutions receive feedback within reasonable time frames.

4.5. Consequences of an institutional audit

The HEQC does *not* rank institutions based on audit outcomes. Audits are designed to be developmental and to encourage systemic, systematic and continuous improvement of quality management appropriate to the individual institution. Every HEI is thus held accountable for its institutional quality assurance, which must be directed towards the realisation of its own vision, mission and strategic goals.

After the adoption of the audit report, and depending on the outcome of the institutional audit, the individual institution is required to submit an improvement plan to the HEQC and Council, and has to report regularly until all improvements have been implemented, after which the HEQC and Council approve a close-out report.

The institution's implementation of the audit report recommendations and the subsequent management decisions based on the audit report will be closely monitored by the HEQC and Council and will form inputs into the new QAF. The HEQC and Council may decide to refer a limited number of specific matters arising from the audit to the DHET or to other stakeholders for further action and/or monitoring, including recommendations to the DHET on the re-registration of private higher education institutions, their programmes, sites and modes of provision to the DHET.

The outcomes of the institutional audit process contribute to the fulfilment of the CHE's statutory responsibilities to:[7]

1. advise the Minister at his/her request, or proactively, on matters related to higher education;
2. assume executive responsibility for external quality assurance within higher education and training;
3. monitor and evaluate the achievement of policy goals and objectives for higher education;
4. report to Parliament on higher education; and
5. consult with stakeholders on higher education matters.

---

[7] S 5 of the HE Act and see too CHE (September 2007) *Institutional Audits Manual*, p.1.

ANNEXURE A: Legislative Context and National Policy

A comprehensive system of external quality assurance for higher education has been implemented in South Africa since the inception of the CHE. With the establishment of the Council on Higher Education (CHE), through the Higher Education Act, 101 of 1997, as amended (HE Act),[8] the principle of quality as a key strategic driver in higher education was established, and the need for a coordinated external quality assurance system realised. The HE Act also provided for the establishment of the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) as a permanent committee of the CHE to perform its quality assurance and quality promotion functions.[9]

Thus, the CHE, through the HEQC, performs its quality assurance and quality promotion functions in terms of the HE Act and in its capacity as the quality council (QC) for higher education, in terms of section 25 of the National Qualifications Framework Act, 67 of 2008, as amended (NQF Act).[10]

With specific reference to quality assurance, the HE Act assigns the following functions to the CHE, through the HEQC:[11]

(i)   advise the Minister of Higher Education and Training (the Minister) at his/her request or proactively on quality promotion and quality assurance;
(ii)   promote quality assurance in higher education;
(iii)   audit the quality assurance mechanisms of HEIs; and
(iv)   accredit higher education learning programmes.

The NQF Act assigns the following quality assurance-specific functions to the HEQC as the QC for higher education:[12]

(i)   develop and implement policy for quality assurance;
(ii)   ensure the integrity and credibility of quality assurance; and
(iii)   ensure that such quality assurance as is necessary for the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF) of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) is undertaken.[13]

Any professional body which engages in quality assurance at the higher education level must co-operate with the CHE, as the QC for higher education, in respect of quality assurance in its occupational field.[14] The NQF Act provides for the CHE, as the QC for

---

[8] Ch. 2.
[9] S. 7(4).
[10] S. 7(1) of the HE Act.
[11] S. 5(1)(a) and (c), 5(2)(a) and 7(1) and (3) of the HE Act.
[12] S. 27(i) of the NQF Act.
[13] In terms of ch. 2 of the NQF Act. The CHE is responsible for the implementation of the HEQSF: s. 7(2) of the HE Act.
[14] S. 28 of the NQF Act.

higher education, to delegate its functions, but it retains responsibility for those functions.[15]

ANNEXURE B: Institutional audits within the context of the HEQC's quality assurance function

B.1 The HEQC's quality assurance function

Through its permanent committee, the HEQC, the CHE's statutory responsibility for quality assurance and promotion is currently exercised through four inter-related components:[16]

(i)   programme accreditation;
(ii)   national reviews;
(iii)   institutional audits; and
(iv)   quality promotion and capacity development.

To this end, the HEQC and Council approves and implements policies and procedures related to the quality assurance of higher education. It has final responsibility for approving all reports related to quality assurance. It makes its judgments independently of other national agencies but seeks to complement their work where issues of mutual quality and standards are involved. The judgments are based on evaluation reports from peer and expert panels.

In terms of the *Founding Document* of the HEQC, the quality assurance framework developed to give effect to its quality assurance and -promotion responsibilities has an explicit focus on the quality of learning and teaching activities, research, and community service in order to deepen and extend the process of higher education transformation.[17] Three criteria are used to measure quality by means of the framework:[18]

(i)   An institution's *fitness for purpose* in relation to its specified mission within a national framework that encompasses differentiation and diversity;

(ii)   *value for money*, judged in relation to the full range of higher education purposes as set out in the national plans and policies for higher education in South Africa; and

---

[15] S. 32 of the NQF Act.
[16] CHE (January 2014) *Framework for Institutional Quality Enhancement in the Second Period of Quality Assurance*, p. 1.
[17] CHE (January 2001, 2nd edition December 2004) *Founding Document of the Higher Education Quality Committee*, p. 9.
[18] CHE (January 2001, 2nd edition December 2004) *Founding Document of the Higher Education Quality Committee*, p. 9.

(iii) *transformation* in the sense of developing the capabilities of individual students for enrichment as well as the requirements of social development and economic and employment growth.

These criteria are located within a *fitness of purpose* framework based on national goals, priorities and targets, most important among which are those defined in the *White Paper 3 of the Department of Education: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education* (1997), the *National Plan for Higher Education* of 1997 and the DHET's *White Paper for Post-School Education and Training – Building an Expanded, Effective and Integrated Post-School System* (2013), as well as the *National Plan for Post-School Education and Training* (2019).

In line with good practice internationally, quality assurance is first and foremost understood as the responsibility of HEIs themselves. The role of an external quality agency such as the CHE is, at a minimum, to ensure that internal quality assurance systems are in place and function effectively.

In the first cycle of institutional audits, from 2004-2011, policies and procedures were developed to strengthen the quality of educational provision in HEIs and the quality of the institutions themselves. A system for the accreditation of every higher education programme (at public and private HEIs) was developed and implemented; a national review process was established for benchmarking key qualifications nationally and internationally; and a comprehensive framework and process was developed and implemented to audit the quality management policies and processes of each institution's core functions of learning and teaching, research, and community engagement.[19]

B.2 Institutional audits in the first cycle of quality assurance: 2004-2011

In the period 2004-2011, all public HEIs in existence at the time, and 11 private HEIs that had volunteered, underwent institutional audits. "Auditing and institutional review" is defined in the HEQC's *Founding Document* as "[t]he review of the effectiveness of quality assurance policies and systems of all public and private providers of higher education, with particular emphasis on teaching and learning, research and knowledge-based community service arrangements".[20]

The approach to the audits was developmental. The audit focus was on "[each] institution's policies, systems, procedures, strategies and resources for the quality management of the core functions of learning and teaching, research and community engagement, including the relevant academic support services".[21]

---

[19] CHE (January 2014) *Framework for Institutional Quality Enhancement in the Second Period of Quality Assurance*, p. 2.
[20] CHE (January 2001, 2nd edition December 2004) *Founding Document of the Higher Education Quality Committee*, p. 13.
[21] Council on Higher Education (June 2004) *Framework for Institutional Audits*, p. 4.

The purpose was to stimulate the development of comprehensive internal institutional quality assurance systems that would include processes and policies to assess the quality of the three core functions of higher education, namely teaching and learning, research, and community engagement. The approach stressed the need for institutional self-evaluation, as well as peer review, in order to develop reflective capacity in institutions so as to meet the criteria of the HEQC's quality assurance framework.

A set of principles for the institutional audits was developed and the general objectives of the audits were outlined. The scope of the audits was the institutional policies, systems, strategies and resources for quality management in two broad focus areas, namely:

(i)   the mission of the institution and the links between planning, resource allocation and quality management; and

(ii)   teaching and learning, research and community engagement.[22]

Nineteen criteria were developed (three for the first focus area and 16 for the second) which specified requirements for effective institutional quality management in these areas.[23]

Each institution then developed a self-evaluation report. Panels of peers undertook site visits and wrote audit reports for the institution they visited. These reports included commendations for good practice and recommendations for improvement. The audit reports, once approved by the HEQC and Council, were sent to the institutions for the development and submission of improvement plans. Subsequently, each institution submitted a progress report on the implementation of its improvement plan.

B.3   Assessment of the first cycle of institutional audits: 2004-2011

The HEQC's performance in the first audit cycle was evaluated as part of an external evaluation of its work. The report was published in 2009.[24]

The external panel considered the development of the institutional audits as the most successful part of the HEQC's work from 2001 to 2008.[25] The audits were said to:

(i)   have been well-designed and well-implemented;

(ii)   have had a significant impact on institutional awareness of the need for quality;

---

[22] Council on Higher Education (June 2004) *Framework for Institutional Audits*, p. 5-7.
[23] CHE (June 2004) *Framework for Institutional Audits*, p. 7 and see too CHE (June 2004) *Criteria for Institutional Audits*, p. 3-20.
[24] CHE (February 2009) *External Evaluation Report of the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) of the Council on Higher Education, South Africa.*
[25] CHE (February 2009) *External Evaluation Report of the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) of the Council on Higher Education, South Africa*, p. 16-17 and p. 24.

(iii) have maintained a healthy balance between the need for institutional accountability and institutional autonomy;

(iv) have contributed to the development of institutional self-evaluation processes by providing institutions with an opportunity for self-reflection;

(v) have established a process of institutional engagement with improvement plans, which contributed valuably to institutional capacity development; and

(vi) have strengthened institutional quality assurance systems and increased the accountability of the higher education system as a whole.

The panel nevertheless made a number of recommendations for consideration for the next cycle of institutional audits. These recommendations were:

(i) The audit criteria should be differentiated and streamlined to avoid superficiality of assessment and to make the audits more effective in using a differentiated approach for individual institutions.

(ii) The HEQC's training of audit chairs should ensure that they are familiar with the rules of evidence and are prepared for managing people.

(iii) Institutional profiles for audits should be prepared in advance by the institutions themselves in accordance with HEQC guidelines and deadlines, and with CHE support, if required.

(iv) The time taken to produce reports should be substantially reduced and should occur according to an agreed schedule.

(v) Final audit reports should clearly differentiate between the views of the institution, the external panel (which should remain unaltered) and the HEQC's own conclusions.

(vi) The amount of information collected for an audit visit should be reduced to essential items only.

(vii) Audit interviews should focus on essential aspects, thereby allowing for a reduced and targeted number of interviews.

(viii) The HEQC should consider reducing the length of audit visits and the number of panel members on a visit.

(ix) The improvement plan component of the audit process should be strengthened.

The panel suggested that the HEQC should find ways to focus on *quality promotion* for the second cycle of institutional audits.[26]

The conclusions that can be drawn from the external evaluation of the first cycle of institutional audits are:

---

[26] CHE (February 2009) *External Evaluation Report of the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) of the Council on Higher Education, South Africa*, p. 24.

(i)   They were successful and added much value to institutional quality assurance.

(ii)   The process had, however, been onerous on institutions and time-consuming and audits would benefit from a more streamlined approach in future.

(iii) The one-size-fits-all approach in the audit criteria neglected to take institutional differentiation into consideration; and the criteria were consequently applied with insufficient focus on differentiation for each institution; the audits thus failed to take sufficient account of institutional diversity in respect of the size, shape, location, context and unique features of an institution.

B.4   The Quality Enhancement Project

Consequent upon the 2009 external evaluation of the HEQC's work, the CHE conducted a review of its activities. It considered its mandate, national priorities for higher education, the best interests of institutions providing higher education, as well as those of students and graduates, and the changing contexts for which graduates need to be prepared. The review resulted in a significant revision of the CHE's role as the QC for higher education, reflected in part in a number of subsequently approved frameworks, such as the *Framework for Qualification Standards in Higher Education* (2013), the *Framework for Institutional Quality Enhancement in the Second Period of Quality Assurance* (2014) and the *Framework for National Review of Programmes leading to Qualifications on the HEQSF* (2015).

The HEQC took the view that, of the three core functions of higher education, namely, teaching and learning, research, and community engagement, the function in the greatest need of immediate attention and improvement was teaching and learning, if the national need for knowledgeable and skilled graduates is to be realised. Enhancing teaching and learning at undergraduate level so as to improve students' likelihood of success was put into action through the *Quality Enhancement Project* (QEP) as part of the HEQC's quality promotion and capacity development mandate. The QEP was formally conceptualised in the *Framework for Institutional Quality Enhancement in the Second Period of Quality Assurance* (2014).[27]

The focus on enhancing teaching and learning at undergraduate level designed to enable student success, entailed a shift from *quality assurance* to *quality enhancement*.[28] A quality assurance system ensures that required standards are met, while a quality enhancement framework focuses on deliberate, continuous, systematic

---

[27] CHE (January 2014) *Framework for Institutional Quality Enhancement in the Second Period of Quality Assurance*, p. 2.
[28] CHE (January 2014) *Framework for Institutional Quality Enhancement in the Second Period of Quality Assurance*, p. 2-3 and p. 10-12.

and measurable improvement of how the student experience contributes towards student success.

No comprehensive institutional audits were done during the Quality Enhancement Project, but it is envisaged that the QEP work will form an input into institutional self-reflection during any subsequent audit process. The major principle that institutions should be responsible for maintaining, improving and enhancing their quality is thereby strengthened.

REFERENCES

Council on Higher Education. 2001, 2nd edition 2004. *Founding Document of the Higher Education Quality Committee*. CHE: Pretoria

Council on Higher Education. 2004. *Framework for Institutional Audits*. CHE: Pretoria

Council on Higher Education. 2004. *Criteria for Institutional Audits*. CHE: Pretoria

Council on Higher Education. 2009. *External Evaluation Report of the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) of the Council on Higher Education, South Africa*. CHE: Pretoria

Council on Higher Education. 2013. *Framework for Qualification Standards in Higher Education.* CHE: Pretoria

Council on Higher Education. 2014. *Framework for Institutional Quality Enhancement in the Second Period of Quality Assurance*. CHE: Pretoria

Council on Higher Education Accreditation. 2015. *International Quality Principles.* Online: https://www.chea.org/sites/default/files/other-content/Quality%20Principles.pdf.

Council on Higher Education. 2015. *Framework for National Review of Programmes leading to Qualifications on the HEQSF*. CHE: Pretoria

Council on Higher Education. 2016. *South African Higher Education Reviewed: Two Decades of Democracy.* CHE: Pretoria

Council on Higher Education. 2020. *Quality Assurance Guidelines for Teaching and Learning and Assessment During the COVID-19 Pandemic*. CHE: Pretoria

Council on Higher Education. 2020. *QA Guidelines during the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Abbreviated Resource*. CHE: Pretoria

Council of Higher Education. 2020. *A Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) for Higher Education in South Africa*. CHE: Pretoria. (in press).

Council of Higher Education.2020. *A Report on the Conceptualisation of a new Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) for Higher Education in South Africa*. CHE: Pretoria (unpublished report).

Department of Education. 1997. *White Paper 3 of the Department of Education*: *A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education*

Department of Education. 2001. *National Plan for Higher Education*

Department of Higher Education and Training. 2013. *White Paper for Post-School Education and Training – Building an Expanded, Effective and Integrated Post-School System*

Department of Higher Education and Training. 2014. *Policy for the Provision of Distance Education in South African Universities in the Context of an Integrated Post-School System*

Department of Higher Education and Training. 2019. *National Plan for the Post-School Education and Training Sector*

European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education. 2015. *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)*. Brussels, Belgium. Online: https://enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ESG_2015.pdf.

European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education. 2019. *African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ASG).* Online: https://enqa.eu/indirme/papers-and-reports/associated-reports/ASG-QA%20English.pdf.

Republic of South Africa. 1997. *The Higher Education Act (Act No. 101 as amended)*. Pretoria: Government Printers

Republic of South Africa. 2008. *National Qualifications Framework Act*, 67 of 2008, as amended. Pretoria: Government Printers

CHE

COUNCIL ON HIGHER EDUCATION